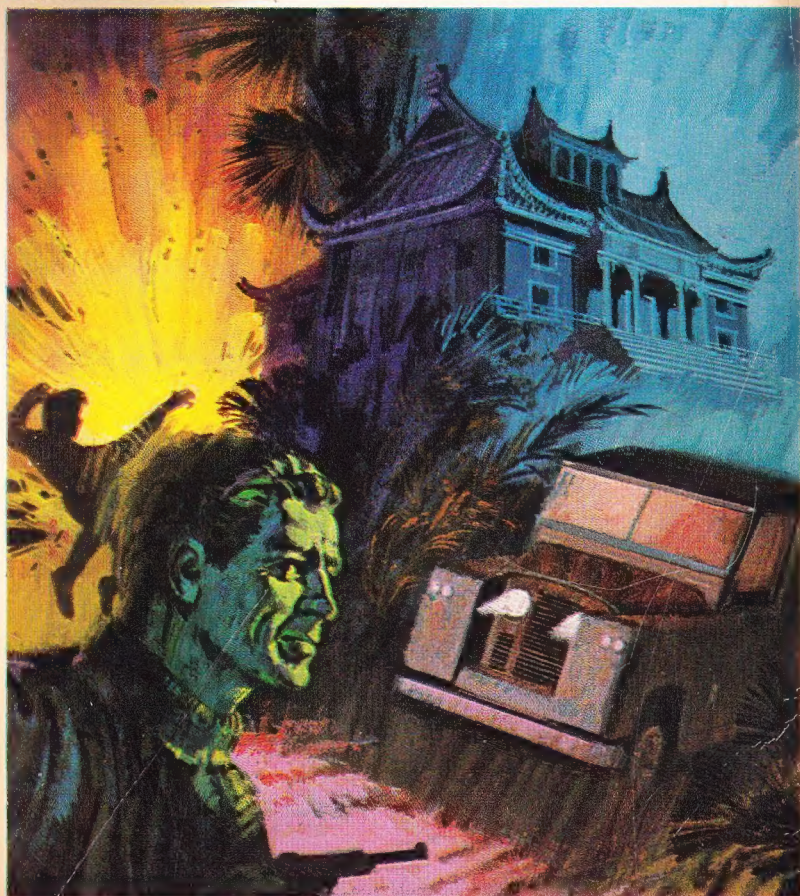


Captain W. E. Johns

# BIGGLES AND THE BLUE MOON



a green knight book





## **BIGGLES AND THE BLUE MOON**

Lin Seng's most treasured possession was the Blue Moon of Asia, one of a fabulous collection of pearls. A mild man, not given to violence, Lin Seng appeals to Scotland Yard when he finds himself a prisoner in his own house, and from then on it is a battle of wits, guns and luck for Biggles and Algy who come to his rescue; a battle against murderers, thieves, and the jungle.



**CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS**

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**BIGGLES  
AND THE BLUE MOON**



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# PREFACE

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## *A Word about Pearls*

PEARL oysters are found in all tropical seas, although fewer than one in a thousand produces a pearl. Pearls vary greatly in quality and therefore in value. They occur in many shapes, sizes and colours: in size from tiny 'seed' pearls to (very occasionally) one the size of a thrush's egg, or even larger. In form it may be round, pear-shaped, button shaped or a 'freak'. In colour it can be pure white, through cream to yellow, pale pink, rose pink, brown, grey, through dark green to black.

A pearl may have a coarse texture or the smooth skin that produces the finest lustre, or 'orient' as it is called. Some have a metallic sheen. No two localities produce exactly the same kind of pearl, although all are formed in the same way, in a series of 'skins' in the manner of an onion. Size is governed by the health and strength of the oyster; that is to say, a sick or weak oyster cannot produce a large pearl for the simple reason that it does not possess sufficient secretion, the nacreous solution of which the pearl is formed.

Colour depends on the mineral or vegetable salts in the water where the oyster happens to be born, or on the bed of the sea where it spends its life. It is on all these things that the value of a pearl depends. A

blemish, such as a crack or a small hole, reduces the value. A pearl, absolutely round and perfect in every way, is rare. The best pearls in the world are found in the Persian Gulf, although those from round the coast of Ceylon follow close.

A pearl is formed in this way. The oyster, in order to feed, must open its shell. Should any unwanted object enter and touch the tender flesh – a grain of sand or perhaps a tiny living organism – the oyster protects itself by squirting it with a nacreous fluid which completely envelops it. This, on hardening, becomes a pearl. It can remain loose or it may stick to the mother-of-pearl lining of the shell causing what is called a blister, of little market value.

When a pearl is judged by weight it is weighed by the 'carat', a carat being originally the seed of an oriental plant. But because the weight of these seeds was not constant, the carat was fixed at a one hundred and fifty-fifth part of an ounce. Larger pearls may be weighed by the 'grain'.

Pearls have been sought and cherished from the earliest historical times, not only for their rarity and beauty, but as a charm against bad luck and ill health. They are mentioned in the most ancient manuscripts as being the most precious presents for kings and princes. They have been found in tombs thousands of years old. Royal crowns have always been embellished with them.

The pearls of the famous Egyptian queen Cleopatra must have been fabulous. The drop-shaped pair which she wore as pendants from the lobes of her ears were reckoned by Pliny to be worth a sum equivalent to £500,000 in our money. The Romans were great collectors of pearls. Nero had his throne and regalia studded

with them. The pearl is one of the things that has never lost its value.

A pearl may disappear, but it never dies. The Queen has pearls that were once worn by Queen Elizabeth the First. From where, we may wonder, did they come? This, of course, may be said of most pearls. If you ever have the good fortune to hold a fine pearl, pause to wonder through how many hands it may have passed since it was lifted in a humble oyster from the bed of some tropic sea. You might also reflect on how many lives it cost, for pearl-diving is a dangerous occupation.

By the way, pearls can be found in the freshwater mussels of British rivers, notably in Scotland and Wales. The lustre does not compare with oriental pearls and for that reason they are not of great value. The author has some from the Spey. There are plenty of mussels, but you may have to do a lot of wading to find a pearl. However, one day a small boy who had been watching the author fishing, becoming bored, decided to do some pearling. He found ten in an hour, one of which, he reported later, he had sold to a jeweller for £10. Some people spend the summer pearl-fishing in Scottish rivers.

W.E.J.



# PEARLS AND PROBLEMS

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ALL four operation pilots of the Air Police were present at the regular monthly conference held in the Scotland Yard office of their Chief, Air Commodore Raymond. They had been discussing the possible transportation by air of valuable pictures which for some time had been disappearing from art galleries and private collections both at home and on the Continent.

‘While we are on this subject of collections there is another matter I might as well bring up while you are here,’ said the Air Commodore. ‘There’s nothing urgent about it and the case might never come our way; but as I’ve been asked for an opinion I have a feeling that it might. Have any of you heard of a gentleman, a Chinese, named Seng? Lin Seng?’

There was a general answer in the negative.

‘Should we have heard of him?’ inquired Biggles, raising his eyebrows.

‘Not necessarily, but as he has the reputation of being one of the richest men in the world, which means anything he does is news so that his name crops up in the papers from time to time, I thought you might have noticed it.’

‘As we were talking about collectors and collections

would I be right in supposing that he collects something – apart from money?’ asked Biggles.

‘You would be right,’ the Air Commodore answered, a trifle dryly. Sitting back in his chair and putting his fingers together he went on, ‘This business of collecting, to a more or less degree, seems to be part of the system of creation. Almost every boy is affected by it at some time, although he may grow out of it. What he collects is usually governed by personal taste and the time and money he has at his disposal. It can be anything from birds’ eggs to match-box tops, butterflies to postage stamps.’

‘I had a craze for old coins,’ put in Bertie.

‘I’ve spent most of my life trying to collect new ones,’ remarked Biggles sadly.

After a smile the Air Commodore continued. ‘Even animals and birds are not immune from this particular disorder. As you know, a magpie will pounce on anything that shines and glitters and take it to its nest, presumably to gloat over it, because a scrap of silver paper, for example, can be no earthly use to it. Monkeys are great collectors. They’ll collect anything.’

‘Are you telling me?’ Ginger said. ‘I once lost a camera that way. It was in my car. The little devil didn’t even stop to take my photograph.’

‘The fun will start when monkeys learn to drive cars,’ stated Biggles. ‘Then they’ll pinch the whole caboodle. The circus people have already taught chimps to ride motor-bikes.’

‘We’ll deal with that when the time comes,’ resumed the Air Commodore. ‘As I was saying, this habit of collecting can become an obsession, particularly with men to whom money is no object.’

'And such a man, I gather, is Mr Lin Seng?'

'You gather correctly.'

'To get down to brass tacks, what does he collect?'

'Pearls.'

Biggles shrugged. 'That's not unusual. Pearl collecting used to be a hobby of the Indian rajahs, and most of the Arab sheikhs along the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf still go in for them in a big way. I've seen some of them – in jam-jars of sea-water. It's an expensive pastime.'

'A man collects what he can afford and there seems to be nothing Mr Seng can't afford,' returned the Air Commodore seriously.

'How lucky can you be?' breathed Ginger.

'Don't jump to conclusions. You could be wrong,' said the Air Commodore grimly. 'All unlimited wealth has given Mr Seng is grief and anxiety.'

'How could that happen?'

'For one thing he's afraid of losing his pearls. For another he knows he may be killed any day trying to protect them.'

'If he feels like that why not get rid of 'em and be done with it?'

'That may not be as easy as it sounds. After all, no man takes kindly to the thought of throwing away things his family has been many years getting together. But never mind that angle. I'd better explain the position while we're not pressed for time in case we are asked to act quickly.' The Air Commodore moved the cigarette box nearer to Biggles.

'Just a minute, sir, before you go into details,' requested Algy. 'Tell me this. Why should we – that is, the government – concern itself with the private affairs

of a Chinese merchant who, from what you say, has more money than he knows what to do with?’

The Air Commodore nodded. ‘You make a point there. I don’t know the official answer, but I could make a guess at it. Mr Lin Seng has long been a friend of ours in many ways. In his dealings he has proved himself honourable, honest and reliable. We have not yet reached the stage of deserting our friends when they’re in trouble.’

‘Fair enough,’ Algy said. ‘That answers my question.’

‘Here, then, is the family history as I have understood it,’ began the Air Commodore. ‘The Lin Seng fortune was established by the present man’s grandfather. He was a shrewd and successful merchant who, in times of trouble, came in on our side. A cynic might say that was because it suited him: he knew which side his bread was buttered; that could be true. If so, why not? It doesn’t alter the fact. It was he who started collecting pearls, at first perhaps as an investment, but eventually as an absorbing hobby. When he died his son carried on. The business grew. Nothing was too big or too small for it to handle. High finance, shipping, tea from India and Ceylon, tin from Malaya, and so on. In a word, the Seng empire grew until it had branches all over the Far East. Under the present Lin Seng the company still prospers. I have never met him, but those who have say he’s a charming man, quiet and unassuming.’

‘What sort of age is he?’ asked Biggles.

‘He’s nearly sixty, but he doesn’t look it.’

‘How does he get on with the Chinese communist government?’

‘There has been no trouble so far. He has said that



the nearest he has ever been to China is Hong Kong, where he has business interests.'

'So he wasn't born in China?'

'No. Years ago, when Lin Seng's father saw the way things were going, he centralized his business at Singapore. He himself decided to live in Malaya. He bought land and built what you might call a small palace in the north-east of the country, not a great distance from the border of Thailand. The place is called Taihan, presumably after the mountain of that name in the region. To do this he had to clear an area of jungle, the area being undeveloped. From all accounts it's a fantastic place for where it is. Money being no object, he had everything laid on while he was at it. To start with he had to build a private road to get there; twenty miles of it through dense jungle and forest to link up with the main road.'

'That must have cost a pretty penny,' put in Biggles.

'I believe what he did was make up an old native track that crossed the peninsula at that point. This was only the beginning. He laid out magnificent gardens; he put down hard tennis-courts, and to round off this private wonderland he laid out a nine-hole golf-course for the entertainment of his guests. You must understand this was done by the present owner's father at a time when labour was cheap. I doubt if it could be done today, even by a multi-millionaire. In due course all this was inherited by the present Mr Lin Seng. Naturally, he doesn't want to give up his home, but he's beginning to wish his father had chosen to build it somewhere else.'

'Why? What's gone wrong?' Ginger asked the question.

'As things have turned out Taihan could hardly have been built in a more dangerous place. We can see that now, although Lin Seng's father, not being able to predict the future, was not to know it. He couldn't have imagined the entire peninsula falling to the Japanese as it did in the last war.'

'What happened then?'

'Taihan became a Japanese headquarters. Lin Seng, like the astute businessman he was, pretended to collaborate with them. In fact, aided by his army of Chinese and Malayan employees, he kept us informed of everything that was happening in the Far East. No one else in Asia was in a position to do what he could do and he made full use of his organization. His spies were everywhere.'

'What happened to the pearl collection?' Bertie wanted to know.

'When he realized that the whole country was bound to fall to the Japs, he buried the lot under his forecourt. For years Japanese troops were parading on the forecourt every day without ever suspecting what was just under their feet. When the war ended, and we took over again, the parcels were still there.'

'Jolly good.'

'So you see, after what he did for us then, we can hardly let him down now. He has come to us for advice and help.'

'I still don't get it,' interposed Algy. 'What's the trouble?'

'The real trouble is, too many people know about those fabulous pearls. He has never made any secret of them. I suppose that with agents stationed at every pearling port with orders to buy every rare pearl that

turned up regardless of price, the thing couldn't be kept quiet. In the whole world there's nothing like the Seng collection of pearls; and I doubt if it could ever happen again. For the past eighty years or so every exceptional pearl that has been found, or come into the market, has gone into it. And, as one would expect, Lin Seng is the greatest living authority on pearls. It is said that he has only to glance at a pearl to name not only the sea in which it was found, but the area of that particular sea. He is only interested in those that are absolutely perfect.'

'What are the pearls reckoned to be worth?' asked Biggles.

'They're priceless, and I mean that literally. I doubt if there is anyone on earth who could afford to buy them all. You see, many of them are unique. In all the Seven Seas such pearls might never occur again, and it is rarity, as with other things, that sets the price. For instance, there is a pair of matching pink pearls the size of marbles. They are, you might say, identical twins. They came from the same oyster. The chances of that happening again are too remote for serious consideration. One such pearl might be worth anything up to £100,000. Such a matching pair would probably command something in the order of five or six times that amount. Yet even this isn't the prize piece of the collection. That honour has been claimed for a glorious *blue* pearl. It is said to weigh over two hundred carats, which would make it nearly the size of a small hen's egg. Of course, it isn't strictly blue, but apparently it has a blue tint and a lustre so pure that it seems as if it is lighted from the inside. Pearls of that colour don't turn up every day, so this remarkable specimen has been given a name. The Blue Moon of Asia.'

‘Have you ever seen these pearls?’ asked Ginger.

‘No. Few people have. But some years ago an American magazine managed to persuade Lin Seng to allow one of its photographers to take pictures in colour and these were subsequently published. They made people gasp. They had to be seen to be believed. Imagine row after row of exquisite pearls, graduated in size, lying on beds of velvet of a colour best suited to them, white on black and so on. All these were arranged according to the particular sea from which they came, Lin Seng, being a perfectionist, would of course do that, because, it is said, no two seas give birth to exactly the same sort of pearl. Something to do with the mineral salts in the water, or the sea-bed on which the oyster lives. I must admit that when I saw those pictures I began to understand the fascination of collecting objects of such beauty. Lin Seng realizes now that the publication of those pictures was a mistake.’

‘Why? Why keep them to himself? Why should he deny other people the pleasure of enjoying them?’ Ginger spoke indignantly.

The Air Commodore answered. ‘No doubt left alone Mr Lin Seng would be the first to agree with you. But people being what they are, which includes a large proportion of rogues and villains, those pictures must have made every jewel thief drool at the mouth. Not only crooks. Rich men would covet them. Some, I imagine, would give their ears to own such lovely things, and in saying that I don’t exclude women. Already there are signs that some people have designs on them – but I’ll come back to that presently. We’re getting away from the main point at issue.’

‘And what’s that?’

'What is Mr Lin Seng to do with his pearls? He feels it would be a pity for the collection to be broken up. In the past they may have given him pleasure, but they have also brought tragedy.'

'How?'

'Let me give you one or two examples of the misery wealth can cause. One day a magnificent pearl was brought in by one of his agents. Examining it under a magnifying glass he found a minute pin-hole. That meant it was not good enough for the collection, so he gave it to his daughter. She was married and lived in Singapore. Within a week she had been murdered and the pearl has not been seen since.'

Biggles frowned. 'How shocking.'

The Air Commodore went on. 'He lost his only son in similar circumstances. On the way from Taihan to Kuala Lumpur he was kidnapped and held to ransom for a million Malay dollars. Lin Seng didn't argue. He sent the money. What he got back was his son's head. It seems the man with the money failed to show up, whereupon the kidnappers, fearing a trap, murdered the boy. The shock killed his mother. Lin Seng is now a lonely old man without an heir to his fortune.'

'If that's the sort of joy money brings you can have it,' declared Bertie.

'Once Mr Lin Seng was himself captured by bandits and had to pay a fantastic sum to buy his release,' continued the Air Commodore. 'Fearing it might happen again he now lives in what is virtually a prison; armed guards on duty day and night; dog patrols; steel-barred windows and so on. The beautiful gardens that once surrounded Taihan have been cleared away to leave the

ground open so that no one can approach without being seen.'

'What a life,' muttered Algy. 'Why does he do it?'

'This state of affairs has come about gradually and it's now rather late to do anything about it.'

'He still lives at Taihan?'

'Yes.'

'Why doesn't he get out?'

'I think he probably would if he could be sure of getting the pearls away with him. He would like to get them to London where he could still enjoy them in his old age. They could live in the strong-room of one of the big banks.'

'Are they covered by insurance?' asked Ginger.

'You still don't understand. Lin Seng isn't interested in the monetary value of the pearls. He wants the *pearls*.'

'What's wrong with taking them to Kuala Lumpur and putting them on a plane for England?'

'Lin Seng is convinced that if ever those pearls left his house he'd never see them again. And he could be right. A lot of people would like to get their hands on them. The devil of it is, if the pearls stay where they are he may still lose them. First, let me remind you of what's going on in that part of the world. To the south, in Singapore, there's a strong anti-government faction that might boil over at any moment.'

'You mean Chinese nationals?' put in Biggles.

'They are not of any particular nationality, nor are they all necessarily communists. The world is full of unscrupulous rogues with glib tongues who induce men of less intelligence to cause trouble for what they can get out of it. Race riots, and that sort of thing, provide opportunities for looting. Men who hope to become

dictators take every chance to stir up trouble and so get a country seething with discontent.'

'That sort of racket is going on all over the world,' Biggles said gloomily. 'Try to stop it by force and there's the deuce to pay.'

The Air Commodore resumed. 'Indonesia has made it clear that she has designs on Malaysia, of which the Malay peninsular is now part, and has already landed parties of commando-type troops on the coast to do as much mischief as possible. Some have been rounded up; others are still at large in the forests. As if that were not enough, to the north-east, no great distance away, across the Gulf of Siam, Vietnam government forces are being steadily pushed back by a communist army advancing from the north. What the position will be in a few months' time no man can say. With such dangerous enemies closing in on him from all sides, is it surprising that Mr Lin Seng is a worried man?'

Biggles nodded. 'I can understand how he feels, but there's still time for him to get out, taking his precious pearls with him.'

'He doesn't think so, bearing in mind the long jungle road he would have to travel to get to comparative safety. Another hazard has arisen recently, although just how serious it is he doesn't know. Strangers have appeared in the forest around Taihan; even small parties of white men. Who they are and what they are doing Lin Seng hasn't been able to find out. They don't behave like genuine prospectors, or hunters, or natural history collectors. Some, certainly, have an interest in Taihan because faces have been seen on the fringe of the forest, even up in the trees, overlooking the open ground round the house. What is the interest? Lin Seng has a suspicion

that some of these men are professional crooks who are only waiting for the confusion that would be caused by a local war or insurrection to raid Taihan for its treasures. Of course, there always have been bandits. We spent years with a lot of troops trying to wrinkle them out. There aren't as many as there were, but there are still some diehards hiding in the jungle. You may remember they ambushed and killed a senior British officer and his escort, and *they* were in an armoured car. A tree across the track forced it to stop. It boils down to this. Mr Lin Seng is convinced that if he tried to move his valuables, or even just the pearls, to a safer place, they wouldn't get as far as the main road. At least, for the moment they are reasonably secure where they are.'

'Can he be sure of that?'

'Yes. Unless the house was attacked by a strong force of well-armed men; and they'd need skilled engineers with explosives to get into his strong-room and blow open the built-in steel safe in which the pearls are kept.'

'Does this mean he never goes out?'

'I'm not sure about that.'

'If he doesn't go out how does he run his business?'

'He keeps in touch with his office at Kuala Lumpur, the capital, either by private telephone or radio – I'm not sure which. Perhaps both. There was a time when the army was able to provide him with an armoured car escort, but that can't be done now our troops have a war on their hands in Borneo. Anyway, no surface vehicle can be absolutely safe because it couldn't leave the road and a road block would stop it. An aircraft seems to be the only answer.'

'Let's get this clear,' Biggles said bluntly. 'What does Mr Lin Seng actually want?'



‘He would like to see his pearls in some safe place in London; one of the big banks, or perhaps the Bank of England, until other arrangements can be made. He could still add to the collection. In such conditions he would return to Singapore or Kuala Lumpur to carry on his business. If things were quiet he might even continue to live at Taihan. The first thing, and the one that matters most, is to get the pearls out of the danger area to where Mr Lin Seng wouldn’t have to worry about them.’

Biggles stubbed his cigarette. ‘Well, sir, I still can’t see that it presents any unsurmountable difficulty. From the way you seem to have been briefed in so many details, I take it that air transport has already been considered?’

‘I have been consulted. I said I would put the matter to you, as a practical pilot of experience, for your opinion. Does any particular point occur to you at first sight?’

‘Yes. What are the possibilities of landing an aircraft close to Mr Seng’s house at Taihan? What about this open space which you say surrounds the house? How big is it? Could a plane get down on it? If so that seems to be the answer.’

The Air Commodore looked doubtful. ‘I wouldn’t think so. The landing area itself might be large enough for a light plane to get down were it not for the forest trees. You know what the Malayan forest is like. Even if the ground is dead level the trees might be anything up to two hundred feet tall, too high to allow a plane to get in. Of course, never having seen the place I couldn’t be sure of that. A helicopter would probably have no difficulty.’

‘It’s a long way to take a chopper. What about this

golf-course you mentioned? Could that be the solution? I mean, is there at least one long fairway? If the course is sprinkled with bunkers that puts it out.'

'I don't know anything about it, and I don't know anyone who has seen it.'

'Then it seems to me that it's time someone looked over the place. On a job like this it's no use *hoping* everything will be all right. What we want are facts. I'd suggest that before anything else is done someone goes to Taihan to get them. Perhaps have a word with Mr Seng about how the operation should be organized. Let him take the final decision. The pearls are his babies. If for any reason the aircraft carrying them made a boob landing and went up in flames, all that would remain of the collection would be a handful of grey dust. I wouldn't like to see that happen.'

'Nor would Mr Seng, you may be sure,' returned the Air Commodore dryly. 'It would be the crowning tragedy of his life. Some people might say what does he want with all these pearls, anyway; but I don't see it like that. Any man, rich or poor, is entitled to do what he likes with his money; and if Mr Seng likes to make a hobby of collecting pearls, there's no earthly reason why he shouldn't. But to come back to the question of how they can be saved, I think you are right. The ideal thing at this stage would be for someone to go out to Taihan to discuss the matter with Mr Seng and see exactly how the land lies. But the whole thing may come to nothing. He may decide to make his own arrangements. I've told you what's in the wind. That's enough to go on with. Think it over. Let's leave it like that.'

'As you say, sir.' Biggles got up, and followed by the others left the room.

## TAIHAN FROM ABOVE

---

A MONTH later, with Algy beside him in an Auster aircraft, Biggles was cruising over Taihan.

There had been no difficulty in finding the country retreat of Mr Lin Seng, for the mountain after which the house was named, isolated and towering 8,000 feet from apparently endless and unbroken forest, provided an unmistakable landmark that could be seen from afar. As the aircraft approached Biggles regarded it with suspicion. 'If we should strike bad weather we'd better not forget it's there,' he remarked.

The house, too, some little distance from the mountain, was unmistakable, if for no other reason than there was no other building in sight. Standing in the open on a gentle slope, long and low, built in the manner of an oriental temple with overhanging eaves and a pillared portico, it was as conspicuous as would be a concrete skyscraper in an English landscape.

The one road that gave access to it appeared as little more than an indistinct track through otherwise unbroken jungle. There were stretches where trees, intertwining their branches overhead, completely hid it from view.

'Not exactly a motorway,' observed Algy sarcastically.

‘It is now probably so little used that it’s in danger of becoming overgrown,’ replied Biggles. ‘In this sort of country growth is so fast that it doesn’t take long for the forest to reclaim anything it has lost. If what Lin Seng says is true about vagabonds in the forest, and all that, it might be difficult to get labourers to do any repair work.’

‘At all events, as far as one can judge from here the ground round the house has been kept clear.’

They surveyed it in silence until Biggles said: ‘The Air Commodore was right. Those trees round it look tall. I suppose it might be just possible to slip in a modern light aircraft fitted with slots or trailing edge flaps, but it would be taking a chance.\* That clearing over to the right of the house must be the golf-course. Let’s have a look at it.’

Biggles took the machine over it and again silence fell as their eyes reconnoitred.

Then Algy said: ‘I don’t care much for the look of that, either. You’d lose an awful lot of golf-balls trying to get round. Apart from the ground being undulating it looks to me as if a lot of old tree stumps, not properly grubbed up, are sprouting again. I can see rushes, too. That means soft patches even if the ground isn’t water-logged.’

‘I’d say it’s a long time since anyone played a round of golf in that mess,’ replied Biggles. ‘I suppose, like the road, it’s been allowed to run wild. I don’t know what staff he has, but the whole set-up gives me the impression that Mr Lin Seng is living in conditions not

\* Fitted with trailing edge flaps the Auster ‘Autocrat’ needs only a landing run of 85 yards. But this is under normal conditions, and does not make allowance for coming into a limited space over tall trees.

far from a state of siege. One thing is clear, anyway. I'm glad I decided to give the place the once-over before flying in with the idea of landing. I'm going to check from ground level before trying anything like that. Well, there's nothing more we can do except take some photographs for future reference, not that they're likely to tell us much more than we already know.'

Biggles made two runs, one at 2,000 feet operating the vertical camera and another from 200 feet with Algy taking oblique shots with a pistol-grip camera.

'I could see someone on the terrace, or veranda, or whatever it is, having a dekkko at us,' said Algy as he sat back. 'If Lin Seng knows what's going on I would have expected him to give us a wave.'

'Maybe he kept under cover because he couldn't be sure of us; maybe he has another reason for not exposing himself in the open,' returned Biggles. 'We may know more about that when we call on him. Meantime let's get back to base.'

Events had moved quickly since the conference in the Air Commodore's office in the matter of the wealthy Chinese merchant and his collection of pearls. Within a week the Air Commodore had sent for Biggles to inform him that a Higher Authority had approved the idea of sending an officer with air experience to survey the general lay-out of the house at Taihan with particular regard to the possibilities of landing an aircraft in order that Mr Lin Seng could be evacuated, if not immediately, in case of emergency.

Contact had been made with Lin Seng and he had welcomed the proposal to the extent of offering to provide accommodation and the hospitality of his house for the officer to whom the operation was entrusted. All

that remained to be done, therefore, was to put this into effect. This did not mean that Mr Lin Seng was to be picked up immediately. That could be arranged later when conditions at the establishment had been examined.

'I have been asked to arrange this and naturally my choice of the officer to do the job falls on you,' concluded the Air Commodore. 'Any questions?'

'Yes,' answered Biggles, taking a cigarette. 'You say contact was made with Mr Lin Seng. How was that done?'

'By telephone, I suppose.'

'You mean, from here?'

'No. I imagine the call would be made to Lin Seng's office either in Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. Whoever was in charge there would transmit the message on the private line to Taihan.'

'You might find out how it was done.'

'Why? Is it important?'

'It could be. If contact was not made direct with Lin Seng it means someone else knows about the arrangement. If conditions at Taihan are as difficult as we're led to believe it wouldn't be safe to trust the telephone. A spy in the office might overhear the conversation. Telephone wires can be tapped, anyway.'

'Contact might have been made by radio.'

'Same thing. Anyone knowing the wave-length could listen in.'

The Air Commodore shrugged. 'I'm afraid we shall have to take a chance on that.'

'I don't take chances if they can be avoided.'

'The only other way contact with Taihan could be made would be by sending a special messenger, a

courier, and you'll be playing that part yourself presently.'

'As long as I don't run into trouble on the way. We shall see. What exactly is the plan?'

'Well, it's no use taking an aircraft to Taihan only to find when you get there that there's no place to get down.'

'I couldn't agree more. So what do we do about it?'

'I thought you'd prefer to make a preliminary reconnaissance on the ground to see exactly what things are like. Can you see any objection?'

'No, but I think I can see a better way of tackling it.'

'How so?'

'To arrive at Taihan by road, in a surface vehicle of some sort, would mean exploring the locality on foot.'

'Of course.'

'To blunder about in the jungle looking for wide open spaces doesn't exactly fill me with enthusiasm. Think of the time it would take. Days, perhaps weeks. Moreover, if Lin Seng is right about strangers hanging about in the forest – and I think that must be true or there would be nothing to prevent him from going to Kuala Lumpur under his own steam – prowling about like a Red Indian on the warpath would not only take time, it could be dangerous. According to Mr Seng, even the private road that leads to the place isn't safe. That doesn't worry me. I'm thinking about the time factor.'

'I take your point,' agreed the Air Commodore. 'Very well, what do you suggest?'

'A lot of time might be saved by making a preliminary reconnaissance from the air, perhaps taking a set of photographs that could be studied before taking the

next step. In that way a lot of ground could be covered quickly. It wouldn't be necessary to land. I would at least have a mental picture of the house and its surroundings. At the moment I haven't a clue as to what the place looks like. One glance at it from the air would be far better than any description. Having had a good look, I'd fly back to base. I know something about the Malayan jungle. It's no place for foot-work. I'm all for an aircraft. Having got a picture of the place in my head, I could then go to Taihan by road knowing something about it.'

The Air Commodore thought for a few seconds. 'Very well, if you'd rather do it that way. I can see the advantages.'

'It means I should have to buy or hire a car on the spot to do the roadwork afterwards.'

'That can easily be arranged. What aircraft would you take out?'

'One of our Austers. Why not? I can't think of a better machine for the job. I wouldn't reckon on finding a suitable machine out there and looking for one might waste time. Of course, there are plenty of civil aircraft in Malaysia these days. Malaysian Airways, who work with BOAC, serve all the big towns – Penang, Ipoh, Malacca, Kuantan, Alor Star, Kota Bharu and so on; but they operate turbo-props, so even if they'd lend us one it wouldn't be much use to me. To be on the safe side it would be better to take out one of our own Austers and base it probably at Kuala Lumpur. The airport is only about ten minutes from the town, where I gather Lin Seng has an office. So has BOAC, which might come in handy. You might arrange landing and servicing facilities for me.'



‘What reason shall I give for you being there, if I’m asked?’

‘Make it unofficial. The one we’ve used before. I’m getting pictures for a BBC TV travel series. That would account for our cameras. Which reminds me. I’d like a permit to carry a gun. You might get me a firearm certificate or a gun would probably be taken off me.’

The Air Commodore nodded. ‘You may need one unless you’re lucky,’ he said dryly. ‘All right. I’ll get that from the Malaysian office here in London. Are you thinking of going alone or will you take someone with you?’

‘I’d better have a partner in case of accident. I may need a spare pilot. I shall probably take Algy. He’s getting a bit browned off with being left at home to mind the office. Bertie and Ginger can stand by to come out to look for us in case we get lost.’ Biggles smiled.

The Air Commodore remained serious. ‘That, I think, could easily happen if Mr Lin Seng’s fears are justified. All right, Bigglesworth, let’s leave it at that. I don’t think there is any immediate urgency, but you might as well be getting on with it.’

‘I’ll see you again, sir, before I go.’ Biggles left his Chief’s office.

We now know what Biggles and Algy were doing in an Auster aircraft over a remote corner of Malaysia.

Everything having gone according to plan, they had arrived in the Federation of Malaya two days earlier, making a final touch-down at Kuala Lumpur where, thanks to the work of Air Commodore Raymond, in London, they found they were expected and all

facilities made available. Even a car, a Land-Rover, had been put at their disposal.

A little tired after their long journey out they had taken rooms at the somewhat expensive Hotel Merlin and spent the following day resting. Apart from sending a signal to the Air Commodore to report their safe arrival and let him know where they were to be found, they had done little beyond discussing their next step.

This had resolved itself as to whether it would be better to make inquiries at the Lin Seng offices in the town in the hope of making personal contact with the man they had come to see, or proceed at once with an air reconnaissance of the final objective, Taihan. After talking the matter over at some length, it had been decided to make the flight, the reason being that having seen the house and its surroundings from the air, they would be in a better position to judge the situation. No attempt would be made to land. As Biggles said, one glance from the air would tell them more than any description, written or oral. It should be a simple matter taking not more than half a day.

This is what they had just done.

The return flight to Kuala Lumpur was made without trouble, and having parked the Auster on the hard-standing allotted to it – for the weather being fine there was no reason to occupy hangar space – they took a taxi for the short drive to their hotel in Treacher Road.

‘This afternoon we’ll get the photographs developed,’ Biggles said as they washed before going into the dining-room for a meal. ‘Tomorrow morning, having had a look at them, we’ll go along to Lin Seng’s office to find out what are the chances of meeting him, either here or at his country house. From what we’ve been told it

isn't likely that he'll be in town. If he's at Taihan it'll mean a run out in the car. We'd better not do that without making an appointment, or letting him know we're on our way, in case one of his guards takes a shot at us before we can say who we are and why we're there. I shan't risk a landing till I've had a look at the place from ground level.'

'Why a man should saddle himself with such a responsibility as a load of pearls beats me,' declared Algy.

'From what I can see of it most rich men have something to worry about,' answered Biggles. 'I have no doubt that however much our Chinese friend loves his pearls there are days when he wishes he'd never seen 'em. But that's his affair. I'd wager if you had that collection you'd take darned good care of it.'

'True enough,' admitted Algy. 'After all, because a man owns something valuable is no reason why it should be taken off him by some thieving skunk. But things at Taihan may not be as bad as Lin Seng thinks. Naturally, he's anxious, and for that reason the dangers may have been exaggerated.'

'We should soon know,' predicted Biggles. 'Come on. Let's get something to eat. I'm hungry, and looking forward to a dish of Malay curry. They don't make it as hot as they do in India.'

'I'm not as mad as you are about curry,' stated Algy.

'I was brought up on it,' reminded Biggles. 'All right. Try the local *satay*. It's good.'

'What's *satay*?'

'Chicken, beef or mutton, grilled on a skewer. Let's go.'

## BIGGLES MAKES A CALL

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THE following morning soon after ten o'clock Biggles and Algy presented themselves at the inquiry counter in the offices of Lin Seng and Company, in Kuala Lumpur, having travelled from their hotel by taxi, vehicles which in Kuala Lumpur are usually made conspicuous by having silver or yellow roofs.

A young Chinese came forward. Having ascertained that he spoke English, Biggles asked if Mr Lin Seng was there. On being informed that he was not he said: 'In that case I would like to see whoever is in charge.'

The boy went off, presently to return and invite them to follow him.

A short walk along a corridor, past offices where clerks of various shades of yellow and brown were busy, and they came to a stop at a door carrying the word Manager. Under it, in smaller letters, Mr P. Tong. The boy knocked on the door, opened it and stood aside for the visitors to enter. He closed it behind them.

The room was large and very well furnished. From a paper-strewn desk a man who was alone in the room got up. 'Good morning, gentlemen. I am the manager

here. Please be seated. What can I do for you?' He spoke faultless English in a quiet, well-modulated voice that had an air of authority.

It was evident from this and the way he was dressed in European fashion that he held a post of considerable responsibility. He was a lean, good-looking man of about forty years of age with a serious expression and eyes that held a quality of thoughtful penetration. His precise nationality would not have been easy to guess. He could have sprung from any of the many local races, but he was predominately Chinese. He might have been Eurasian.

With this Biggles was not concerned. He was satisfied that as a Branch Manager of the vast Lin Seng organization he held a position of trust. 'My name is Bigglesworth,' he announced. 'This is a friend and colleague, Mr Lacey. We arrived the day before yesterday, from London. We have some business with Mr Lin Seng and rather hoped, although not with any great confidence, that we might find him here.'

'He is not here.'

'Do you know where he is?'

'I couldn't be sure.'

'At Taihan, perhaps.'

'He was there when I last spoke to him.'

'How long ago was that?'

'About a week.'

'Let us come to the point,' said Biggles. 'Do you know why we have come here?'

'No.'

Biggles looked surprised. He glanced at Algy.

'Should I have known?' inquired Mr Tong.

'Evidently I was mistaken in assuming you would

know,' replied Biggles. 'This I do know. Someone in London has been in touch with Mr Lin Seng. He is expecting us. I imagined contact would have been made through you, or someone else here; a confidential secretary, perhaps.'

'I am the only confidential secretary here.'

Biggles was looking a little puzzled. 'I was given to understand that Mr Lin Seng was at Taihan when certain arrangements were made. Is there any other way a person in London could have made direct contact with him?'

Mr Tong did not answer at once. With his penetrating eyes on Biggles' face he gave the question some thought. At last he said: 'I don't want to appear discourteous, Mr Bigglesworth, but you must realize that in the position I hold I have to be careful with whom I discuss my employer's affairs.'

'I appreciate that. It cuts two ways. In my position I also have to exercise some discretion in talking about – well, in this case, why we are here.'

'Of course. But as manager here in his absence surely I am to be trusted? Do you feel inclined to tell me what your business is with Mr Lin Seng? I am in his confidence. I'm sure he would tell me if he were here.'

To which Biggles answered: 'What I find myself wondering is why Mr Lin Seng hasn't told you already, bearing in mind that he would naturally suppose I would call here.' After a pause he went on. 'But I can see that if we are going to fence with each other we shall waste a lot of time and at the finish get nowhere. What I suggest, therefore, is that you have a word with Mr Lin Seng. He would I am sure vouch for our *bona fides*. We will leave the room while you are speaking with him.'

'I would have suggested that myself had I been able to get in touch with him.'

'Why can't you? I was under the impression that a private telephone connected this office with Taihan.'

'There is one. Or there should be.'

'What does that mean?'

'The telephone appears to be out of order.'

'Oh! That's unfortunate. Does this happen very often?'

'It has only happened once before and then it was caused by a falling tree bringing down the wires. I suppose that could have happened again.'

'Strange that it should happen at this particular moment. Has there been a storm?'

'No. What is in your mind?'

'I imagine it would be an easy matter for someone to cut the wires and so sever communication between here and Taihan.'

'In the miles of forest through which the wires run after leaving the main road, there would be no difficulty in doing that. But why should anyone do such a thing?'

Biggles shrugged. 'I would have thought you would be in a position to answer that. Have you sent anyone out to investigate?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I had no urgent message and I hoped the fault, if it is only a minor one, would soon be put right by the Post Office. It would be if it was on their section of the line. Their poles carry all the wires as far as the private road that leads to Taihan.'

'How long is it since you discovered the phone was out of order?'

'Two days. I tried to get through this morning, but the line was still dead.'

'That's a pity. A phone call would have saved us time. What about radio? I had an idea you were in radio communication with Taihan.'

'Not now. We were for a while, but Mr Lin Seng gave it up when he found other people could pick up the signals.'

'So that's out. Tell me, Mr Tong, can you think of any way contact could have been made recently with Taihan?'

'I imagine the British Government has its own methods of communication, although, naturally, it doesn't make them public. A special courier could have been used. If you are on official business why not consult them?'

'I may have to do that,' Biggles said slowly.

Mr Tong went on. 'If you will tell me exactly what it is you want, why you are so anxious to see Mr Lin Seng, I may be able to suggest something. After all, I don't know you.'

Biggles hesitated. 'My business with him is strictly confidential. If it isn't a rude question how long have you worked for Mr Lin Seng?'

'Twenty years.'

'Good. Then I take it he has faith in you, in which case I feel I shall not be betraying a confidence if I answer your question. The fact is, Mr Lin Seng has some valuable property which in view of the political situation he would like to move to a safer place. We have been sent here to help him to do that.'

'You mean the pearls.' Mr Tong spoke casually. His words were a statement more than a question.



'Er - yes. Apparently you know about them.'

'Of course. I know a great deal about them. Indeed, I may claim to know many of them intimately.'

'So you've seen them?'

'Frequently. I have carried some of them in my pocket. In certain cases I was sent to examine a rare specimen, to value it and perhaps conduct the negotiations for its purchase. It was in that capacity that I first worked for Mr Lin Seng. I, too, am what you might call an expert on pearls.'

'Then you would be sorry to see them fall into wrong hands?'

'If necessary I would defend them with my life. To know pearls as I do is to love them.' Mr Tong spoke quietly and with obvious sincerity. 'And that has nothing to do with their monetary value,' he added.

'We begin to see eye to eye,' returned Biggles approvingly. 'That being so I will put my cards on the table. Our purpose in coming here this morning was in the hope of making an appointment with Mr Lin Seng, at Taihan or wherever else he might be, in order to discuss the details of what he believes, rightly or wrongly, might be a difficult and perhaps dangerous operation.'

'The removal of the pearl collection from Taihan?'

'Yes. If my information is correct Taihan is heavily guarded so it seemed advisable to make an appointment rather than arrive there unexpectedly. So you see, as Mr Lin Seng is not here and you say you cannot reach him on the telephone, I find myself in some difficulty. As far as I can see, if I am not to hang about here indefinitely, there is only one thing left for me to do.'

'And what is that?'

'Go to Taihan, anyway. Are you fairly certain that Mr Lin Seng will be there?'

'Yes. Had he left I would have been informed. If you go without an appointment you may have an uncivil reception. The house can only be reached by road; and I can assure you of this; the precautions Mr Lin Seng has taken against undesirable visitors are fully justified.'

'That is a risk I shall have to take.'

'You will need a reliable car.'

'We have one.'

'It is a long run, about a hundred and forty miles, and I doubt if you would get there and back in a day.'

'What is the road like?'

'The main road is all right, but for the last twenty miles, that is, the private road, it is not good. It has been difficult to get labour to keep it in repair. Men say they will be killed if they go there.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. They won't talk, but they must have a reason. But it is the only road, so if you go you will have to make the best of it. It has this advantage. You cannot lose your way.'

'Have you used it?'

'Many times, but not recently.'

'How long is it since you used it?'

'It must be nearly three months. Even then it was showing signs of neglect. It can hardly have improved. I am not going out of my way to discourage you, but it is only fair to warn you that you may encounter difficulties. Would you like me to speak to the Post Office people to find out if they know the telephone is out of order and if they are doing anything about it?'

'I'd be obliged if you would. It might save me a fruitless journey.'

'I will do it at once.' Mr Tong reached for the telephone.

When, five minutes later, he hung up, he had the desired information. 'They know about the line to Taihan being out of order,' he said.

'How do they know that?' put in Biggles quickly. 'Has anyone, apart from you, tried to get through?'

'There have been several calls; but of course it isn't known who made them. A Post Office man, a reliable Malay engineer, was sent out yesterday on a motor-cycle to try to find the break, if that is the trouble. He has not yet returned, and as no message has been received from him, they don't know when he will be back. It may not be for some time. That will depend on the nature of the fault and where it is.'

'That settles that, then,' said Biggles. 'I don't feel like cooling my heels for perhaps some days, so it means we shall have to try to get through to Taihan by car.'

'When will you go?'

Biggles glanced at the clock on the wall. 'We might as well start today. We should get there before sunset. I wouldn't attempt to get back straight away unless Mr Lin Seng was not there.'

'Would you like me to come with you?'

Biggles looked almost startled by the offer, so unexpected was it. 'It's very kind of you, but we may be away some time and, frankly, I don't see how your coming with us could serve any useful purpose. You would really be taking an unnecessary risk. If all I hear is true the trip could be dangerous.'

'That would not surprise me, but I am not unaccustomed to dangerous enterprises.' For the first time Mr Tong's face relaxed in a ghost of a smile. 'I told you, as a young man I was sent to pearling stations, most of them out of the way places, to buy the most expensive gems. Having a fortune in money or pearls in one's pocket made it a hazardous occupation.'

'I can believe that,' replied Biggles. 'But I think, Mr Tong, you would serve us better, and Mr Lin Seng, by remaining here. You know what we intend to do. If we were not back here in a week you could assume something had gone wrong, in which case you might be good enough to inform the Air Police office at Scotland Yard, in London.'

Mr Tong's expression remained inscrutable. 'So you are from Scotland Yard.'

'Yes.'

'Had you said so when you first came in I would have been reassured. I would of course have asked to see your credentials.'

Biggles produced them. 'I'm sorry, but in the course of our work we don't disclose more than is necessary.'

'Very wise, particularly in this part of the world. You said *air* police. Does that mean you have an aeroplane with you?'

'Yes. We flew out in it from England.'

'Then why don't you fly to Taihan. Surely that would be the answer to your question.'

'I'm afraid it isn't as simple as that. We have already flown over Taihan, but we still don't know if it is possible to land there. That is the reason why we are going by road – to see the place from ground level.'

'Ah! Now I understand.'

Biggles got up. 'We were some time reaching an understanding, but in the circumstances I suppose that was inevitable. You didn't know us and we didn't know you. Thank you for being so helpful. You will see us again, I hope, in the not distant future. If we reach Taihan and find Mr Lin Seng there we may stay two or three days. That was arranged. Our problem was how to get there.'

'Don't hesitate to let me know if I can be of assistance,' said Mr Tong.

'Thanks. I may hold you to that,' were Biggles' last words.

Outside, as they waited for a taxi, Algy asked: 'Do you seriously intend to start for Taihan today?'

'Yes,' Biggles told him. 'We might as well. Unless the phone is put in order, conditions will be the same tomorrow, and the next day, so I see no point in waiting. When there's a job to be done I like to get on with it. The longer you fiddle about the less inclined one is to tackle it. We'll dash back to the hotel for an early lunch, collect the car and move off.'

'That suits me. Are we taking any kit?'

'I don't think that's necessary at this stage. We'll see how things go. We can fetch it if we need it.'

'What did you make of this chap Tong?'

'He struck me as sound. If Lin Seng has trusted him for twenty years that should be good enough for us. If we were to get the information we wanted I could see no alternative to telling him what we were doing. All the same, I have an uncomfortable feeling there's more to this breakdown in communications than he realizes. It may be a coincidence that it should happen at this

moment, but I've learnt to be suspicious of coincidences.'

'Why do you suppose he offered to come with us?'

'Ask me something easier. Considering the position he holds, he must be anxious to know what's going on; but I didn't want him with us. He might have got in the way. Alone we're free to do as we like. However, we should soon know more about it,' concluded Biggles as a taxi drew in at the kerb.

## THE ROAD TO TAIHAN

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WITHIN an hour Biggles and Algy were on their way to Taihan, making good time on the first-class road they would be able to enjoy for the first hundred and twenty miles; that is, until they reached the private road that ended at Mr Lin Seng's country residence.

Biggles was driving. At his suggestion Algy was keeping a watchful eye on the telephone posts and wires that accompanied the road on the off chance of seeing the Malay linesman at work. Should they see him they might be able to find out how long it was likely to take to get the telephone back to working order. If this was to be only a matter of hours it might be worth while returning to Mr Tong's office and put through a call to Taihan from there, as was the original intention.

At first there was a fair amount of traffic; cars, bullock carts, bicycles and sometimes a bus (for modern Malaya is well served with long-distance express bus services); but after the paddy fields and rubber estates had been left behind and they found themselves running through uncultivated country, much of it forest, the traffic began to thin out. By the roadside were Flame of the Forest trees, with their brilliant vermilion flowers, and the bright yellow blooms of the *angansana* tree.

Wild orchids were everywhere. For a main road it was singularly attractive.

They reached the side road to Taihan, for which they had to keep a sharp look-out for fear of missing it, in a little under three hours, without seeing the Post Office linesman. It happened the turning was signposted. The arm carried only one word, Taihan, but it was enough to settle any doubts that may otherwise have arisen.

The drive now became a very different matter. At first it was not too bad, although Biggles had to drop his speed to thirty miles an hour; but presently the surface of the road deteriorated, and as ruts and pot-holes became more frequent, he could seldom do more than twenty without risking damage. The road, in fact, became little better than a track, dank, muddy, and for the most part so narrow that it would not have been easy to turn.

On both sides the forest rose like the walls of a precipice from a riot of tropical undergrowth. Overhanging trees sometimes tangled their branches above so that the car proceeded through a natural tunnel in a dim green twilight. There was nothing remarkable about this. Really it was to be expected. The only thing that could be said to the road's advantage was it had long straight stretches. Unfortunately the best use could not be made of these because of not infrequent bridges over gulleys and watercourses. Built of rough timber they were very 'rustic' indeed and often looked none too safe. There were no side turnings so there was no risk of losing the way.

Telephone poles, also of rough timber hewn on the spot, carrying twin wires, accompanied the road. Algy continued to watch them, for seeing no sign of damage,



or the linesman, there was reason to think they had not yet reached the point of the breakdown. A clue to this was the imprint of a motor-cycle tyre. It had obviously not been made by a car because there was only one mark and it ran up the middle of the track. The road surface being soft, it was plain to see, and could only have been made recently. They assumed it to have been made by the bike ridden by the Post Office man. There were some car tracks, but they were old ones, as could be judged by other marks, made by animals superimposed on them. Biggles had ascertained this by once stopping to examine them closely.

They saw little of the wild life of the forest. Apparently it only made use of the road for getting about. Grey monkeys were common enough, mostly in troops, and made their presence known by chattering abuse on the appearance of the car. The only other animals seen were a deer that once ran across the road in front of them and a wild pig that was enjoying a wallow in a more than usually deep pot-hole. With a snort of alarm it disappeared into the forest. There were plenty of birds, chiefly Java sparrows, spotted doves and an occasional kingfisher.

Biggles, quite suddenly and without warning brought the car to a stop.

Algy looked at him inquiringly. 'Something wrong?'

'I don't know,' answered Biggles slowly. He was frowning.

'Then what's on your mind?'

Biggles had a long hard look down the road behind them before he answered. 'That motor-bike track.'

'What about it?'

'I don't see it.'

‘Well?’

‘Did you at any time as we came along see more than one track?’

‘No. But don’t forget I was watching the wires.’

‘I never noticed two wheel tracks, either. Had there been a double track I must have seen it. From that I was sure the Post Office man must still be somewhere ahead of us.’

‘If it was the Post Office man.’

‘Who else could it be? But that’s beside the point. It doesn’t matter who it was. A motor-bike came up this road. It only came so far. It didn’t go back or it must have made another track. What the devil could have happened to it? Take a look at the road just behind us. Can you see a track?’

Algy looked. ‘No.’

‘There isn’t one, that’s why. We’ve just come over a soft patch. If that bike came over it, it must have had wings. It didn’t leave a mark.’

‘How long since you saw the track?’

‘The last time I saw the imprint of that tyre was two or three minutes ago. Ever since we left the main highway it’s been in front of me. I suppose that’s why I suddenly noticed it had gone.’

‘That certainly is queer,’ agreed Algy. ‘Where could the fellow have gone?’

‘That’s what I’m going to find out,’ asserted Biggles in a curious voice. ‘He didn’t go on. He didn’t go back. Why?’

‘He may have spotted what he was looking for, a broken wire, for instance.’

‘Then why didn’t we see him; or his bike? Did you watch the wires?’

'Yes.'

'All the time?'

'Well, I wouldn't swear I never took my eyes off them. If you remember you called my attention to that wild hog sprawling in the road.'

'So you could have missed a break in the wires, or maybe a branch lying across them?'

'Yes, I suppose that could have happened,' admitted Algy. 'What are you going to do?'

Biggles put the car in reverse. 'I'm going back to where the track of that motor-bike ended. We should find the answer there. You watch and stop me as soon as you spot the track.'

The car, in reverse, began to crawl back along the track. In this manner it had covered the best part of two hundred yards, their own fresh tracks clear all the way, when Algy called 'Stop'.

Biggles stopped and switched off. He let down a window and listened. He opened the door and listened again. 'Come on,' he said, and got out.

Together they walked to where the motor-cycle track ended abruptly in some indescribable marks on the road. Biggles studied them. He laid a hand on Algy's arm and looked hard at the jungle. There was not a sound. Not even a monkey hooted. 'Keep your eyes skinned,' he said softly. 'Something happened here and I don't like the look of it. Have your gun handy.' He drew his own.

'It looks to me as if he skidded and came a cropper,' offered Algy.

'Maybe.'

Algy pointed to a place where the fringe of undergrowth had been flattened, although some of it had partly recovered. 'It looks as if that's where he fell.'

'But he didn't do that.' Biggles pointed to where two wires hung slack from their insulators. 'They were cut,' he went on succinctly. 'Wires don't break by accident at their strongest point. Moreover, it would be a strange thing, wouldn't it, if *both* wires snapped at the same time? Someone must have climbed the pole to cut them. The Post Office man would hardly have done that. He spotted the break, so, naturally, he stopped to do what was necessary. That was his job.'

'But he didn't do anything.'

'I'd say he never had a chance.' With restless eyes probing the jungle Biggles advanced slowly to the flattened undergrowth. Reaching it he stopped, sniffing. He threw a significant glance at Algy. 'There's something nasty not far away. Watch out.' He took a few steps into the jungle and stopped again, staring at something on the ground just in front of him. 'Here it is,' he said in a tense voice.

Algy joined him, and following the direction of his eyes saw two sandalled feet protruding from a heap of dead leaves and debris. It appeared they had been exposed by some animal, scratching. A cloud of flies hung over the heap.

Holding his handkerchief over his mouth and nose, Biggles went up to it and kicked away enough leaves to expose the upper part of the body of a man; a coloured man. A Malay. He wore a light uniform jacket. It was disfigured by a dark stain.

'My God!' breathed Algy. 'The Post Office man. Murdered.'

Biggles' face was like granite. 'Now we know why he didn't go back.'

'Where's his motor-bike?'

'Never mind that.'

'Aren't you going to look for it?'

'Not on your life. Let's get back to the car. If you see a movement, shoot. This is no place to stand talking. Something could hit us and we'd never know where it came from.'

They backed to the road and did not stop till they reached the car. They got in one at a time, the other watching, gun at the ready. 'Keep watching,' ordered Biggles crisply as he started the car and drove on quickly for perhaps a quarter of a mile before again allowing it to run to a stop. 'So now we know,' he said.

'Do you think there was somebody there?' asked Algy.

'I'd bet on it. I saw a palm frond move. They don't move themselves, but it may have been an animal. Aside from that I had a feeling we were being watched. It was too quiet. The monkeys knew. They'd gone.' In a different tone of voice Biggles went on. 'You realize what this means?'

'That depends on how you look at it.'

'It's mucked up all our plans.'

'I don't see why it should.'

'We shall have to go back to Kuala Lumpur. We can't leave that unfortunate fellow's body lying there to be devoured by ants or wild animals. We've no means of burying it. Besides, the Post Office should know what has happened, otherwise the phone never will be repaired. What we were told about this road being dangerous wasn't the imagination of a nervous old Chinaman.'

'You're sure the wires were deliberately cut?'

'Of course they must have been cut. No doubt that

unlucky Malay knew that. He would have repaired the damage had not some swine bumped him off. Somebody didn't want that line repaired. If that's the case there doesn't seem much point in the Post Office mending it. It would only be cut again somewhere else, and in this sort of country I don't see how that's to be prevented.'

'If we go back to Kuala Lumpur we shan't get to Taihan today, that's certain. How much farther have we to go?'

Biggles looked at his mileage meter and did some quick mental arithmetic. 'About ten miles.'

'That makes it about ten miles back to the main road.'

'Near enough. Why?'

'I was thinking, I don't see why we need to go all the way back to Kuala Lumpur. That'd be an awful bind. If we got to the main road surely we'd be able to get a message through either to Tong or the Post Office. We could stop a car or a bus going to Kuala Lumpur and ask the driver to take a note or say what has happened.'

'Yes, we might try that,' agreed Biggles. 'Come to think of it we came through a village about five miles short of where we turned off. I noticed a Chinese place called The Teahouse of the Golden Flower, or something of the sort. They might be on the telephone. If not it's a likely place for a vehicle to stop on the way to Kuala Lumpur. We shall have to turn back anyway, so we might as well get on with it. It's a confounded nuisance, but there it is.'

With a little difficulty Biggles turned the car so that it faced the direction of the main road. 'I shan't waste any time going past the spot where the wires have been

cut,' he said. 'Somebody might have a crack at us. From the jungle it'd be too easy. As we go past make a note of anything conspicuous to serve as a guide to the spot where the wires have been cut, otherwise whoever is sent out to collect the body may have a job to find it. And keep your gun handy.'

'Okay.'

The car moved on, accelerating quickly. It was doing forty miles an hour, the limit for safe driving, by the time the danger point was reached. It raced past. Nothing happened.

'See anybody?' asked Biggles, dropping to a more comfortable speed.

'Not a soul.'

'Good. I feel better with that place behind us.'

'A half fallen tree leaning on another makes a good mark for the spot.'

'I'll remember it. When we come back ourselves we shall see where we stopped the car.'

In a little more than a quarter of an hour, travelling over the best part of the road, they were back on the main highway. Biggles brought the car to a standstill facing Kuala Lumpur. 'Get out and stop anything that comes along,' he told Algy. 'I'll write a note.'

They waited ten minutes. No motor vehicle had appeared.

'It would happen like that,' grumbled Biggles irritably. 'We're wasting time. We could have been at the teashop by now. Get in. We'll press on.'

Again they set off and did not stop until they pulled in at the teahouse, a low but long wooden building in the traditional Chinese manner, the roof, with pointed eaves overhanging a raised veranda in front. Biggles

had hoped to find a vehicle parked outside, the driver having stopped for a cup of tea, but in this he was disappointed. He opened the door and they went in.

There was only one customer. A white man dressed in a soiled open-necked white shirt, fawn breeches and mosquito boots. He sat at a bamboo table at the far end of the room reading a newspaper. He threw them a perfunctory glance. The Chinese proprietor, hands tucked into the sleeves of his blouse, came forward and greeted them with a bow.

'You speak English?' questioned Biggles, really to confirm that he did, for the language is commonly spoken.

'Velly good English. You like room for night?' was the answer.

'No, thanks. Have you a telephone?'

'Velly sorry. No telephone.'

'Is there a telephone in the village, or anywhere near?'

'Mister Yuntan.'

'Who's he?'

'Police.'

'Where does he live?'

'Not far. You want see? You like tea while I fetch?'

Biggles looked at Algy. 'I don't know about you, but I could do with a cuppa.'

'Same here.'

Biggles turned to the proprietor. 'Yes, we'd like some tea, please. You might find out if the policeman is at home.'

The man bowed and retired. He must have sent someone to the policeman's house, for he served the tea himself. 'Velly nice tea,' he said, with a touch of pride.



As a matter of detail, it was, and they enjoyed it.

A few minutes later two men, from their dark skins apparently Malays, marched in. Both wore the khaki uniforms that are the summer dress of the Malay police and carried pistol holsters on their belts. One, a sergeant from the three stripes on his sleeves, saluted. 'You have some trouble, sirs,' he questioned. Like most Malayan officials he spoke English fluently, if with an accent.

Biggles answered. 'Yes and no. It's not really our business, sergeant, but I want to get a message to the Post Office in Kuala Lumpur. We happen to know they sent out a mechanic to repair the telephone to Taihan. We've just seen a man lying dead beside the place where the wires are down on the private road to Taihan. We think it must be him. The Post Office should know. We've just come from Kuala Lumpur and we don't want to go all the way back. I understand you are on the telephone. Will you send a message?'

'I will inform police headquarters, sir. They tell Post Office. How is this man dead?'

'We didn't touch the body, but we think he was murdered. The Post Office man went out on a motor-cycle, but we couldn't see it.'

'Will you show me, please?'

'Show you?'

'Yes, sir. The body.'

Biggles had not expected this. 'I can tell you where it is.'

'When I telephone headquarters I must give particulars,' explained the policeman. 'I must see the body. If we do not get there before dark perhaps we cannot find it.'

'Can't you telephone first?'

'What can I say if I have not seen body?'

'Have you no transport of your own?'

'Only bicycle.'

Biggles shrugged and turned to Algy. 'I suppose we shall have to take them. If the body is left there all night there may not be much left of it tomorrow, after wild animals have had a go at it. If we take them we shall have to bring them back, and that's going to take time.'

'What's wrong with putting their bikes in the car? They could cycle home after we've shown them the body and we could press on.'

'That's an idea.' Biggles looked at the sergeant who had of course been listening. 'You heard that. If we take you will you bring your bicycles and leave us to go on?'

'Yes, sir, if we go at once.'

'All right. You fetch the bicycles. By the time you get back we shall be ready.'

'Yes, sir.' The two policemen went out.

The man who had been sitting in the corner also went out. He did not speak.

Biggles finished his tea and paid the bill, congratulating the proprietor on the quality. As they went out he said to Algy: 'You drive. I want to have a word with the coppers.'

'What about?'

'That fellow sitting in the corner.'

'I took him to be a planter.'

'So did I – at first. If that's what he is he'd have a car. I don't see one anywhere about. He must have overheard our conversation, but he didn't appear interested.'

If he's a local, one would have thought he'd be interested in a murder.'

In a few minutes, with the two policemen sitting in the back of the Land-Rover with their bicycles, they were on their way to the scene of the crime.

Half turning in his seat Biggles said to the sergeant: 'Who was the man in the teahouse? Do you know him?'

'His name is Mr Sosbell.'

'Is he a local man, a planter, or something like that?'

'No. For little while he lives at teahouse.'

'What does he do?'

'He does not tell me.'

'How long has he been here?'

'Two - three weeks.'

'Is he English?'

'He talks like American.'

'Has he a car?'

'No.'

'Then how does he get about?'

'Sometimes he goes on bus.'

'To where?'

'I don't know. Sometime a friend comes in car and they go for a ride. He does not talk to anybody. Maybe he sick.'

Biggles said no more. He was thinking of what he had been told about strangers in the locality.

On the private road to Taihan Algy had to switch on his lights. In the open it was not yet dark, but under the trees the light was no more than a dusky twilight.

In due course they reached their objective. Biggles got out. 'Here we are,' he said, feeling confident that no attack would be made on four men, two of them

policemen. The others followed him into the undergrowth. He stopped suddenly, peering forward. He looked around. He looked up at the broken wires. He looked at Algy. 'We can't have made a mistake. This *must* be it.'

'Why, what's wrong?'

'The body isn't here. It's gone,' said Biggles grimly.

## CHAPTER 5

# TAIHAN

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BIGGLES looked at the sergeant who was regarding him with a strange expression on his face. 'I'm sorry,' he said simply. 'The body has been moved.' He pointed. 'I can only assure you that an hour ago a body was lying there. You can see the heap of leaves that had been used to cover it. An animal had been scratching in them. That's why we saw it.'

The sergeant gave Biggles a queer look. 'You quite sure of this?'

'Of course I'm sure. I don't imagine things.'

The sergeant produced a pocket torch and examined the ground closely, feeling among the leaves. Some stuck to his hand. He brushed them off. 'Blood,' he said. 'I believe you sir. A man has lain here, bleeding. What could happen?'

'Obviously someone must have moved it, unless a tiger or a panther found it and dragged it away.'

Again the sergeant examined the ground about. 'No,' he said. 'The body was not dragged or we would see. It was carried.'

'I'm sorry to have put you to all this trouble,' went on Biggles. He pointed to the drooping telephone wires. 'That's why the man stopped here. Given time he would

have repaired the line. That was what he was sent to do.'

'It is too dark now to look for him,' said the sergeant. 'We will come back tomorrow when it is light. What will you do?'

'We shall go on to where we were going when we discovered the broken wires, and afterwards, the body of the linesman.'

'I knew him. I remember now I saw him go through village. But, sir, this road goes only to one house, Taihan.'

'I know. That is where we are going.'

The sergeant looked astonished. 'To Taihan!'

'Yes. We have an appointment with Mr Lin Seng. I am afraid we are going to be late.'

'Not many people go to Taihan now,' said the sergeant, dubiously.

'We have a business proposition to discuss with him. Now, if you don't mind, we'll go on.'

'You come from Kuala Lumpur?'

'Yes!'

'Will you stop to speak to me, please, on your way back?'

'We'll certainly do that,' promised Biggles.

'Good night, sir.' The two policemen departed on their cycles.

Biggles and Algy got into the car. Biggles took the wheel and drove on. 'I'm sorry I had to tell the sergeant we were going to Taihan, but what else could I do? There's no other reason for using this road. He'd know that, and it's no use getting wrong with the police by lying to them.'

'This is a queer business altogether,' muttered Algy.

'I must say I was shaken to the marrow when you said the body had gone. The possibility didn't occur to me.'

'Nor me, although, as I said, I had a feeling when we were last here that we were not alone. There's something queer about this whole business. I can't see the point of it. Somebody wanted to put the telephone out of action. There's no argument about that. But why murder that wretched linesman? Surely that wasn't necessary. The man who cut the wires need only have waited until the linesman had done his job and then cut them again, either at the same place or somewhere else. There must have been another reason for killing that man. I'd say he knew something and had to be silenced. He was bound to be missed and a search made for him.'

'True enough, but it might have been a long time before his body was found, if it was ever found at all. It would soon have been eaten by something. From what I know of tropic jungles, by the end of a week all that would be left would be bones. It just so happened that we came along looking for him otherwise it might have been some time before a search-party was sent out.'

'You're probably right,' agreed Biggles. 'Nothing in the jungle, insect or animal, would be likely to eat a motor-bike or a set of tools, so they could only have been taken away; not for use, but to get rid of 'em.'

'Following that line of argument, why not take the body away at the same time?'

'Maybe it wasn't thought necessary until someone, the murderer perhaps, knew we'd found the body. He might have been hiding close by in the jungle watching

us while we were here. When we turned back he'd guess what we were going to do, so he took the body.'

'That seems to be the only possible answer,' said Algy.

'Not quite. Someone who had an interest, knowing we had found the body, could have got in touch with the murderer and told him to move it.'

'But only three people could have known: the man who runs the teahouse and the two policemen.'

'Four,' corrected Biggles. 'You're forgetting the man in the corner – Sosbell.'

'We didn't speak to him.'

'No, but he would see the police arrive and must have overheard our conversation. Come to think of it he left the teahouse before we did. He may have a means of getting in touch with the man, or men, responsible for the murder. In order to prove a murder you have to produce the body.'

'Is that why you asked the sergeant who he was?'

'No. At the time we didn't know the body had disappeared. When I asked the sergeant those questions I was only mildly interested. I thought his behaviour a little odd. In a place like a Chinese teahouse miles from anywhere most white men would have said 'hello' when we walked in; or at least given us a nod. He might even have joined us. He took not the slightest notice of us – or that's how it appeared. We're told he speaks like an American; which is not to say he is an American. A lot of people learn to speak English in America. If he is an American it's all the more odd that he didn't pass the time of day with us. I've always found Americans affable people, ready to chat with a stranger anywhere, any time. It seems he *lives* at the Teahouse of the Golden



Flowers. What's he doing there? Nothing, apparently. It's a queer place for a man to park himself.'

'He may be an author collecting local information for a book.'

'That wouldn't take weeks. Moreover, he'd need a car. The sergeant says he hasn't one. Why not? Obviously he doesn't need one. He's content to stay where he is.'

'All right. So you regard him as a suspicious character.'

'I wouldn't go as far as that. I'm merely saying, in view of what we know, his behaviour puzzles me. Anywhere else and I wouldn't give him a second thought; but as things are at Taihan I'm doing some hard thinking.'

'We started this argument on the assumption that someone may have got a message through to the murderer telling him that the body had been found so it had better be moved,' Algy said. 'You think this fellow Sosbell may have been the man?'

'Tell me who else could have done it.'

Algy thought for a moment, but did not answer.

'Let's try the elimination method,' went on Biggles. 'Apart from ourselves only four men knew the body had been found – that's assuming Sosbell overheard our conversation. Our Chinese host didn't leave the room, so it couldn't have been him. That rules one out, leaving three. I'm pretty sure it wasn't either of the two policemen and I'll tell you why.'

'They're on the phone.'

'Granted. Take the sergeant first. I'm certain he knew nothing about the body having been moved. When we got to the spot and I said the body had gone

his behaviour was genuine; exactly what one would expect. At first he was surprised. His next reaction was annoyance. Then for a moment he was suspicious of us. That wasn't faked. I'd bet on it. No, he wouldn't have acted as he did had he known the body wasn't there. I doubt if he would have troubled to come with us to the place. There would have been no need for him to get his hands bloody groping about in the leaves for something he knew wasn't there. I rule him out.'

'What about the other policeman?'

Biggles shook his head. 'If he tipped someone off he must have been smarter than he looked. When could he have done it? The two policemen left the teahouse together. They were back inside five minutes with their bicycles. Had the constable gone away on his own the sergeant would have wanted to know what he was going to do. That's how I see it.'

'As you've worked it out it begins to look as if Sosbell may have had something to do with it,' conceded Algy. 'If so he must have been pretty smart. He would have to have some method of communication that we know nothing about.'

'That's not impossible. We know what's at stake at Taihan and brains as well as money may be behind a scheme for lifting Lin Seng's precious playthings. But that's enough to go on with. We must be getting close to Taihan. Pity we couldn't have arrived in daylight when we could have seen what we were doing.'

It was now practically dark, although the sky being clear of cloud there was moon and starlight when the car passed one of the rare open areas. Under the trees the moonlight did nothing to help. The car was of

course travelling with its lights on, and more than once they caught and reflected the gleam of eyes, mostly small, beside the road.

Suddenly Algy said sharply: 'Steady! There's something in front of us.'

Biggles cut his speed to dead slow. The headlights picked out a narrow bridge. It looked a flimsy affair; but it must have been stronger than it looked, for although it sagged a little under their weight as the car crawled across, it held up. Beyond it the track went on across what looked like open ground, a flat treeless expanse flooded with moonlight.

As with a sigh of relief Biggles ran on to it, he said: 'This must be —' That was as far as he got for things began to happen, and happen so fast that for a moment he lost his usual composure.

First an electrical bell jangled with what, after the silence, was a fantastic din. Within seconds the beams of two searchlights leapt out of the darkness ahead to sweep the open ground in the vicinity of the bridge. They found the car at once and came to rest on it so that it stood in a blinding blaze of light. Somewhere dogs set up an excited clamour. Biggles stood on everything and stopped the car with a jolt. Shielding his eyes against the glare, he could just make out dark figures converging on them.

'Get out and hold your hands up,' snapped Biggles. 'It's the only thing we can do.'

Suiting the action to the words he jumped down and stood with his hands held high. Algy did the same. 'Now what?' he muttered anxiously.

'We shall soon know — unless they shoot us before asking questions. I think this must be Taihan. We knew

the place was guarded, so we should have expected something like this.'

'Even so, I wasn't expecting to arrive at a military war station,' returned Algy.

'Stand still and keep calm.'

Figures loomed, closing in; not clearly because they were silhouetted against the blaze of light. It could be seen they carried rifles. From their clothes they were either Chinese or Malays: it was not possible to tell which. With rifles at the ready they came up.

'No more,' shouted a voice.

Biggles and Algy did not need to be told.

With half a dozen rifles within inches of their ribs the same voice demanded in no uncertain manner: 'What people you?'

'English,' returned Biggles.

'What you do here?'

'We are police officers from London,' explained Biggles. 'We have come to see Mr Lin Seng. He is expecting us.'

The man who was doing the questioning gave an order to one of his men, who ran off.

'May we put our hands down?' requested Biggles. 'We shan't run away. We had trouble getting here.'

There was no reply.

After an awkward interval of two or three minutes, taking a chance Biggles lowered his hands. 'I'm only going to light a cigarette,' he announced, feeling for his pocket.

No more questions were asked. With rifles still covering them at close range and the searchlights still on, Biggles and Algy waited with all the patience they could command. There was in fact nothing else they could

do. Biggles supposed a message had been sent to someone of higher authority, and it presently turned out that in this he was correct.

A rather plump figure in European clothes, with an escort, advanced from the glare. It stopped, apparently to survey them, and came on again to within two or three paces. 'Who do you say you are?' inquired the man in faultless English.

'We're police officers from London,' announced Biggles. 'We were sent out at the request of Mr Lin Seng. If this is Taihan, and he is here, I would like to see him.'

'You will have papers of identification?'

'Certainly.' Biggles handed them over.

The questioner perused them and handed them back. 'You are speaking to Mr Lin Seng now,' he said. 'You chose a bad time to arrive. I apologize for this unfriendly reception, but I have to be careful.'

'We tried to get you on the telephone from your office in Kuala Lumpur to make an appointment,' explained Biggles. 'We spoke to a Mr Tong who told us the telephone was out of order and he had no other means of getting in touch with you. On the way here we discovered why the phone was out of order. The wires have been cut, and the mechanic who was sent out to locate the fault was murdered.'

'Ah! As I thought. You must tell me about this. Do you know anything about an aeroplane that flew over here yesterday?'

'Yes. It was ours. I hoped to find a place to land, but not being satisfied that it was possible without risk of damage I flew back to Kuala Lumpur and decided to come by road. We should have been here some time

ago but for finding a body which we felt obliged to report.'

'To whom?'

'The police at a village on the main road. I don't know the name of it, but there is a teahouse called The Golden Flowers.'

'That is sufficient explanation,' said Mr Lin Seng. 'But let us not stand here talking. I shall be honoured if you will accept the hospitality of my home.'

'Where shall I put my car?'

'You can leave it in front of the house for the time being. It will be safe there. Follow me.'

Mr Lin Seng waved away the guards and walked off.

Biggles and Algy got into their car and followed.

'We've got here, anyway,' said Biggles softly.

They had not far to go. The residence of which they had heard so much appeared in the reflected glow of the searchlights on some gently rising ground facing them.

Although in view of what he had been told Biggles was prepared for something spectacular, he had not expected Taihan to be quite like it now appeared. It was more in the style of a small palace than a house. Before the gardens had been cleared to leave the surrounding ground open – the ground they were now crossing – the approach must have been breath-taking.

The guards had disappeared. The searchlights died.

Putting the car in the place indicated, they followed their host up a broad flight of steps to a long wide portico and across this into the hall of the house itself, when it was at once clear they were in the home of not merely a millionaire but a man of education and taste. Without going into details, the furnishings, rich Chinese

silks and rugs, lacquer chests of exquisite workmanship carrying a fortune in carved ivory and jade – were something to wonder at, and Biggles began to understand why this merchant prince was reluctant to be forced to abandon an establishment on which he must have lavished not only money but time, love and care.

Mr Lin Seng stopped at a door leading off the hall. 'Don't be intimidated by all this,' he said quietly, with a gesture. 'I live very simply and in the Western manner, as you will see. Would you like to be shown to your quarters at once or will you first have a drink? After your journey I'm sure you could do with one. There's plenty of time. The evening meal won't be served for another hour.'

'In that case I'd like a drink, thank you,' answered Biggles.

'Good. What will you have? Forgive me if I don't join you in anything alcoholic, but I haven't touched spirits since my doctor advised me against them for health reasons. But you have anything you like.'

'I'd like something long, a thirst quencher,' decided Biggles. 'What do you usually drink?'

'*Champo*.\*'

'That would suit me fine,' declared Biggles.

'And me,' put in Algy.

Mr Lin Seng opened the door and they went in.

\* *Champo*. The juice of half an orange and half a lemon; a common and popular drink in Malaya.

## MORE PROBLEMS

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Two hours later, refreshed by a bath and replete after a simple but satisfying meal, Biggles and Algy sat at ease with their host on the portico, with a coffee table between them, looking out over the moon-drenched forest that rolled away on all sides in an unbroken sea of vegetation. The air was softly warm, a little too warm perhaps in the absence of a breeze, under a star-en-crusted sky. Artificial light was not needed. The curious night-breath of the living forest, sweet, musty, sickly, sour, difficult to describe, was heavy in the atmosphere.

Biggles, a cigarette in his fingers, had just finished telling the story in detail of their first attempt to reach Taihan by road.

Mr Lin Seng had listened in silence. 'What is hard to understand is why these people in the forest, whoever they may be, should have found it necessary to murder that unfortunate telephone linesman. He had done them no harm. All they had to do when he had finished his work was cut the wires again somewhere else. With the line running through so many miles of jungle, they could have gone on doing that indefinitely. It would be impracticable to guard the wires all the way.'

Biggles answered. 'There must have been a reason for



killing the man. It's my guess that it was done to silence him. He must have seen something, perhaps the man, or men, who had done the damage. Knowing the wires had been deliberately cut, if he recognized them he may have threatened to report them.'

'As no doubt he would have done given the opportunity,' said Lin Seng. 'That might well be the answer.' He went on. 'Just now you mentioned this man Sosbell who is living at the teahouse on the main road. I have heard of him and find his continued residence there hard to explain. What can he be doing?'

'Have you any reason to suppose he is interested in your pearls?'

'None whatever. I have never seen him.'

'Then how do you know about him?'

'If I have enemies I also have friends who keep me informed of any unusual events or new arrivals anywhere in the district,' revealed Lin Seng, somewhat vaguely. 'Eventually I shall know his purpose here. From what you have told me there is reason to believe he might be a sort of contact man with others in the forest. There is nothing I can do about that.'

'You mean, about men in the forest?'

'Yes. You have seen it, so you will realize how impossible it would be to find anyone hiding in it. The British Army, with all the soldiers at its disposal, discovered that during the communist-inspired rebellion a few years ago. The situation here is gradually getting worse. This cutting of the telephone wires, severing communication with the outside world, is the most disturbing thing that has happened so far. It suggests my enemies, who are waiting for me to leave, are becoming impatient.'

Algy spoke. 'You're sure it's your pearls they're after?'

'Without a doubt. What else could it be? There are other valuable things in this house, as you may have noticed, but there are similar objects elsewhere. My pearls are unique. They are easily portable, and their monetary value would exceed by far this house and everything in it.'

'Aren't you afraid someone may try to break into the house?' inquired Biggles.

'That has been tried but it failed. Naturally, I have taken every possible precaution to prevent anyone even getting near the house without being seen. Remember what happened when you crossed the bridge.'

'I touched off an alarm bell.'

'Yes. An electric device. I make my own electricity.'

'Would the alarm work if someone crossed the bridge on foot?'

'Weight makes no difference. The apparatus works on the ray system. If the ray is broken the bell rings. The only disadvantage of that is animals have been the cause of false alarms.'

'Is the bridge a necessity? I hadn't time to see what was below.'

'It is vital. Where the road ends it spans a narrow but deep watercourse, a gully with steep sides. A natural feature.'

'But that wouldn't prevent a determined man from getting across without using the bridge,' Biggles pointed out.

'He could only cross through the water at the risk of his life. There is an obstacle. At night he might not notice it, but in daylight he would, and he would need

to be either a brave man or a fool to proceed. While we are on the subject I must warn you not to attempt it yourself. The crocodiles might think they are being fed.'

Biggles stared. 'Crocodiles?'

'Yes. There were always some here, as there are in many Malayan rivers and lakes. When my troubles started I thought it might be a good idea to keep them there as an extra safeguard; so while it was a simple matter to procure food by shooting wild hogs and other animals that encroached on my vegetable garden from the jungle, I fed them. Word of this must have gone round the crocodile population, for their numbers increased. This served a double purpose in that it discouraged beasts from raiding my garden. They keep away, now, with the result that the crocodiles, not finding as much food thrown to them as hitherto, must be getting hungry.'

'I shall remember it,' declared Biggles emphatically. 'Now, with your permission, I would like to get down to the business that brought us here. First of all, let me get this clear. Am I right in thinking that you want to leave Taihan, with your pearls, if that can be organized?'

'Yes. I might return after the pearls are in safe custody. I like it here, and without the pearls to tempt thieves there would be no danger.'

'Very well. We will see about getting you away.'

'It's no use thinking of using the road.'

'We had no difficulty in getting here!'

'That was an entirely different matter. You were coming here. There was no reason to stop you. Had you been *leaving* here I doubt if you would have got far. I have cars here, but I wouldn't care to try to leave

in one. Not long ago one of my drivers, an efficient and courageous young Malay, volunteered to try to get through to Kuala Lumpur with a message. A few minutes after he had crossed the bridge we heard shooting. We have neither seen nor heard anything of him since. Had he got through he would have returned. So you know what to expect should you try to get back to Kuala Lumpur by road. I would have warned you of this before you started had it been possible.'

'But we shall *have* to go back by road,' asserted Algy. 'We can't just settle down here.'

'That, I fear, is your problem,' said Lin Seng. 'You are welcome to stay as long as you wish.'

'We shall have to go back if for no other reason than we brought nothing with us – no change of clothes, no shaving —'

'There's no need for you to leave on that account,' interposed Lin Seng. 'I should be able to provide you with anything you require.'

Biggles came in again. 'My chief in London explained your difficulties to me, but I must admit I didn't realize things were as bad as this. It seems you're literally besieged in your own house, and, moreover, cut off from the outside world.'

'That's what it has come to,' agreed Lin Seng. 'I should have left here before matters reached this stage. But how was I to know? Not long ago I could have had a military escort, but now the soldiers are otherwise engaged.'

'But how long can you go on like this?' asked Biggles. 'What about food? You have a staff to feed beside yourself. Can it be that your enemies are trying to starve you out?'

'It would take them some time to do that. Being so far from Kuala Lumpur I have always held a good reserve of food here, mainly rice, which is the staple diet of my servants.'

'How about water?'

'There is no difficulty there. We have a well that has never run dry.'

'Aren't you afraid these people who are after your pearls might try to take the place by storm?'

'They will receive a hot reception if they try that. They once made a half-hearted attempt but soon withdrew. On another occasion an arrow with a message attached to it was fired from the forest.'

'Indeed! What was the message?'

'If I cared to leave, taking nothing with me, I was promised a safe passage. I didn't consider it. For one thing I didn't believe it.'

'In what language was this message written?'

'In English.'

'I'd like to see it some time.'

'I'll show it to you in the morning. Now you've seen for yourself what conditions are really like here, what are you going to do?'

Biggles rubbed out his cigarette. 'One thing is certain; I'm not prepared to stay here indefinitely, doing nothing, leaving the initiative with the enemy.'

'What can you do?'

'I shall be in a better position to answer that when I've explored the possibilities of landing an aircraft here. If there isn't a landing ground we may have to make one. Have you any idea of how many people there are in the forest?'

'None whatever. I think there must be quite a few.'

‘Just one party, or two, or three . . .’

‘That I can’t answer. There is at least one white man. I have never seen him myself, but some of my watchers have. He must keep in the background.’

‘We may see something of him when we have a look round, which with your permission will be tomorrow morning.’

‘I would advise you not to go far from the house.’

‘If we can find what we’re looking for we shall return to Kuala Lumpur and come back in a plane. Have you any objection to flying?’

‘Of course not. I did quite a lot of flying on my business trips before this trouble began.’

‘Good. In that case we will pick you up, presumably with your pearls, and fly you to Kuala Lumpur at a convenient time to catch one of the regular service planes to London, if that is where you want to go. It means of course that you would have to declare your pearls to the Customs authorities.’

‘I’m prepared to do that. I am also willing to charter a special plane if that would be an advantage. The fewer the people who know about the pearls being in transit the better.’

‘How much would the pearls weigh, approximately?’

‘Ten to twelve pounds, with their cases. The cases weigh more than the pearls.’

‘Would you, in an emergency, be prepared to put the pearls in your pocket and abandon the cases?’

‘In an emergency, whatever you have in mind by that, yes. The cases could be replaced, but not the pearls. For the moment I am satisfied they are safe where they are.’

‘Even if the house should catch fire?’

'What you mean is, if it should be set on fire.'

'Yes.'

'The pearls are kept in a fireproof vault.'

'What about your staff? Are you sure they are to be trusted?'

'I think so. One must trust somebody. They are all carefully chosen men.'

'How many have you on the establishment?'

'About twenty.'

'All men?'

'Yes. Some, the outdoor servants, such as the guards, never have occasion to come into the house unless I send for them. Almost all have done military service.'

'What nationality are they?'

'Chinese or Malays with the exception of a Sikh and two Tamil-speaking Indians I engaged some years ago when I was in Ceylon. The Chinese work mostly inside the house, and the Malays outside. The sentry patrolling the front of the house is a Malay.'

'How often are the guards changed?' inquired Biggles.

'Every four hours. They do four hours on and eight off.'

'And where are the dogs kept?'

'In an enclosure at the back of the house.'

'We must make ourselves known to them very soon or should we meet them they may take us for intruders. Now I think it's time we were going to bed. I want to get to work early tomorrow morning.'

'Would you like to see my pearls first?'

Biggles looked somewhat surprised by the question. 'I don't think that's necessary, but I would certainly be interested.'

'I think you should see where and how they are kept. Then, in the event of an attack on the house, or should anything happen to me, you would know where they were. You are the only Europeans here and I am sure you would do your utmost to protect my property.'

'It might be as well for us to know in which part of the house they are,' Biggles said.

'Very well. Come this way.'

Biggles and Algy followed their host into the house, along a passage to a door built like the door of a vault. This Mr Lin Seng unlocked with a key which he took from his pocket, saying: 'I keep this key always on my person.'

'What if you should lose it?' queried Biggles. 'I imagine you have a duplicate.'

'Of course.'

'Does anyone else know where it is?'

'No.'

'Is that wise? Suppose you were to disappear? If the duplicate key couldn't be found dynamite would be needed to get this door down, and that wouldn't do the house any good.'

Lin Seng paused. 'You are quite right. Tomorrow I will show you where I keep the spare key.'

The open door revealed a short flight of stone steps descending between concrete walls. 'This was part of the original construction of the house, designed for the express purpose of guarding its treasures,' said Lin Seng, switching on a light.

A few paces and the passage ended at a built-in steel safe. 'This came all the way from England,' remarked the owner, working the combination lock.

'Aren't you taking a chance, showing us this, con-



sidering the short time you've known us?' Biggles said dubiously.

'I don't think so,' was the calm reply. 'Should you be impostors with ideas of making off with my pearls, you would not leave this house alive. We are watched all the time we are here.'

The heavy door swung open slowly and silently to disclose several shelves. On these lay flat, fine leather cases perhaps eighteen inches long by half that width – they were of different colours. Mr Lin Seng took one out, unfastened the hasp and lifted the lid.

Biggles stared in breathless wonder. He was prepared for something exceptional, but what he saw exceeded anything he could have imagined. The few large pearls he had seen had been solitary, or at the most, in pairs.

Here, lying in grooves depressed into dark blue velvet, rows of perfectly matched pearls gleamed rosy pink under the strong white light from overhead. He did not know a great deal about the value of pearls, but he realized each one was worth a fortune.

'Beautiful, are they not?' said their owner, in a voice that was almost a caress. 'Strange that a lowly mollusc lying on the bottom of the sea is able to produce a thing of such exquisite beauty. Men can make imitations, but not even modern science can do this.'

'I'm beginning to understand their fascination,' answered Biggles slowly. 'But I don't forget that each one of these may have cost a hundred divers their lives.'

'They chose to do it, as other men choose to live dangerously. Even divers come under the spell of what they seek. It isn't only for money that they do it. To open an oyster and see one of these lovely things gleaming in its heart is a thrilling experience,' said Mr Lin

Seng simply as he replaced the case and took out another, a small one. 'This is my treasure of treasures,' he went on, opening the case.

On a bed of white silk lay a single pearl the size of a large marble, pale blue, translucent, glowing as if illuminated by interior fire. 'The Moon of Asia,' breathed Lin Seng in a voice near to reverence. 'There is nothing like it in the whole wide world. If there is it has yet to be found.' He replaced the box in the safe. 'That had better be all for tonight. I will show you the others another day. For my part I am never tired of looking at them.'

In silence they made their way to the lounge.

'Before we retire there is one thing I would like to be clear about,' Biggles said. 'In the morning, when we go out, is there any likelihood of our being shot at by your guards?'

'None whatever. You are the only Europeans at Taihan. They know you are here. If you should see any of my staff about take no notice. Don't go too far from the house.'

'We shall do what we came to do,' replied Biggles. 'Thank you for having such confidence in us. That should make our task easier. There is a possibility that tomorrow the position will change.'

'How could that happen?'

'Through the murder of the telephone mechanic. The police sergeant I took to the place will let his headquarters know about it. At least, I asked him to do that and he said he would. The Post Office will be informed. One supposes they will send out another mechanic to repair the line. No doubt it will be cut again, but in the meantime there is a chance that Mr Tong will have got

through to you. If so you could explain the position here. You might mention that we arrived safely.'

'Ah! I understand. I shall stand by the telephone in case a call comes through.'

'I think that's all, sir, so I'll say good night,' concluded Biggles.

'Good night. If you need anything press the bell. A night staff will be on duty. They speak English, more or less. It was necessary to have a common language.'

'I am duly impressed,' said Algy to Biggles as they went upstairs. 'I must say those pearls are *something*.'

'Yes, but are they worth risking your life for, because that is what our Chinese friend is doing,' returned Biggles.

'In his place I would feel the same as he does. A dirty thief would only get them over my dead body,' stated Algy grimly.

## THE GOLF-COURSE

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THE following morning Biggles and Algy were down early, nothing having happened during the night to disturb them. In fact there had been no sound, no incident, to suggest that conditions at the mansion-house were anything but normal.

They found servants already moving about, engaged in household tasks, but Mr Lin Seng had not yet put in an appearance. They were told it might be some time before he was down. So they had a light breakfast and went out to survey the premises for the first time in daylight.

They paused on the long veranda, gay with tubs and pots of orchids and other exotic flowers arranged at intervals. Beyond the protective balustrade there was nothing to indicate the extraordinary state of affairs that prevailed, except perhaps a weed-grown expanse of open ground where one would have expected to see gardens. The only marks on it were wheel tracks leading to the bridge. It was not easy to believe what they had been told was true.

Everything looked quiet and peaceful. Their car had been put away. At all events it was not where they had left it. There was not a soul in sight. The only sound

was the barking of monkeys somewhere in the forest. Birds, large and small, mostly with bright plumage, sometimes showed themselves as they flew from tree to tree.

Biggles and Algy stood in silence as they made mental measurements of the open ground. Presently, discussing the possibilities, they agreed that while it might not be impossible to land a light aircraft it would be a risky operation. It was not so much the dimensions of the space available. With a clear approach it would have been a different matter; but with trees towering all round the boundary, up to a height of well over a hundred feet, the length of the run after the wheels had touched down was too short. However, with a stiff breeze in the right direction a steep sideslip in might do the trick. As Biggles remarked, it was the sort of landing one would only try in dire emergency; never from choice. He hoped, he said, he would never have to attempt it.

They walked down the broad flight of steps to the level ground. Here a young Malay appeared, a rifle slung over his shoulder, to say he had been told to show them where their car had been put. As they walked round to the back of the house Biggles asked him why he carried the rifle. Did he ever use it?

The lad said he would use it if he saw someone coming towards the house and did not stop when ordered to do so.

'This is certainly a queer business,' observed Algy quietly as they walked on, following their guide. 'What goes on? I don't get it. Is Lin Seng at war with the people in the forest or isn't he? I mean, there doesn't seem to be any shooting. After all, while we were

standing on the veranda, or even now, anyone in the forest could have a crack at us.'

'Where would that get them?' returned Biggles. 'To shoot one of us wouldn't bring them any nearer the pearls. The position at the moment seems to be a sort of armed truce. Stalemate. Both sides playing a waiting game. The people in the forest may be hoping Lin Seng will try to get away, taking his pearls with him. It would be a simple matter to ambush him between here and the main road. They must realize they couldn't take the house by direct attack without casualties. And even if they succeeded they couldn't be certain of finding the pearls. They can't suppose Lin Seng would be so daft as to leave the pearls in a dish on the hall table. I imagine Lin Seng would be content to allow things to remain as they are were it not for the risk of an invasion or an uprising. As you say, it's a queer set-up.'

Arriving at the rear of the house they observed that it had been built in the shape of an oblong with one of the long sides missing. That is to say, from the main building two short wings, one at each end, had been built out at right angles. The lower part of these appeared to be garages and store-rooms; their car stood in one of them. The upper storey was obviously staff quarters, the outside men, gardeners, foresters and the like, a large number of which would be employed in the ordinary way.

A few men were moving about engaged in various tasks. Some were armed. Some rifles had been stacked against a wall apparently ready for use if suddenly required.

Beyond the building the ground lay open, more or

less the same as in front. There was one difference. A break in the barrier of trees; a gap; partly overgrown at ground level by shrubs. It was obviously too narrow for an aircraft to pass through, so it offered no solution to the problem of landing a plane.

'Could that gap be widened, do you think?' Algy said, as they stood looking at it.

'I doubt it. Anyway, it would be a big job, taking a lot of men a long time, so that can be ruled out.' Speaking to the Malay who was still standing by them Biggles went on, pointing: 'Is there a path through there?'

'Yes, *tuan*.'

'Where does it lead?'

'To the place for the golf.'

'Ah yes. Of course. Is it ever used now?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Very dangerous. Bad men with guns.'

'How do you know?'

'I think.'

'You only think. Have you seen these men?'

'No. I never go there.'

'How long since anyone went there?'

'Long time.'

Biggles spoke to Algy. 'I suppose no one has any reason to go there. As things are Lin Seng would hardly be interested in knocking a little ball around. We might as well have a look at it, although I expect we shall find it overgrown. Still, it may be our only hope of getting a plane on the carpet.'

'Lin Seng said stay near the house,' cautioned Algy.

'I heard him. That won't get us anywhere. I can't

see why this should be any more dangerous than anywhere else within rifle range. If the enemy wanted to whittle down the garrison it would only be necessary to post snipers in the forest to poop off at anyone who showed himself. We haven't been shot at yet. If that was the intention we offer a nice easy target standing here.'

'All the same, this lad probably knows what he's talking about,' argued Algy. 'He's been here longer than we have.'

Biggles shrugged. 'Let's have a look at this alleged golf-course, otherwise we might as well go home.'

The Malay was looking startled. 'You go?'

'Yes.'

Looking anything but happy, the Malay unslung his rifle and slipped a cartridge in the breech, making it clear that he was prepared to go with them.

'You needn't come,' Biggles told him, feeling it was not fair to expose him to dangers, if in fact there were any. The Malay obviously thought there were.

'My orders stay with you,' said the native. 'I come.'

'Very well,' returned Biggles. 'If those were your orders you'd better obey.'

Walking on to the gap it was at once evident that there had been a track, or at any rate a path, cut through a strip of forest, here not very wide. The jungle had of course encroached as a result of disuse, so that it was necessary to walk in single file, pushing aside branches and ducking under the arching fronds of tree-ferns. Had there been any opposition it would have been a perfect place for an ambush. As Algy realized, although he did not comment, they could all have been shot before there was time to take defensive action. He thought Biggles



was taking a chance, but saw his point that it was unavoidable if they were to serve any useful purpose.

They crossed a narrow wooden footbridge one at a time, not without trepidation, for it was fast being devoured by rot and fungi and looked far from safe. However, although it swayed a little it supported them. Below was a brook, perhaps the same one they had crossed on their arrival. Algy looked down but could see no crocodiles.

Soon after this the path widened and there in front of them was what had been the golf-course, although they would not have recognized it as such had they not been told it was there. They stopped to look at it, and Algy's first impression was they need go no farther. A considerable area of treeless ground, long and rather narrow. In the matter of size there was nothing wrong with it as a landing ground for a light plane in the hands of a capable pilot; but for the most part it was now so overgrown with weeds, shrubs, rushes and seedling trees that it was obviously useless for their purpose. It was just possible to see where the fairway had been, for being trimmed short it was the last ground to run wild. It ran out for nearly half a mile before making a loop to swing back to a pavilion now in the last stages of dilapidation, and almost smothered by a tangle of vines and other climbing plants.

Biggles asked their escort if the ground had originally been more or less open, or had it been brought about by felling the forest trees.

He didn't know.

'We'll ask Lin Seng when we get back,' Biggles told Algy. 'I was thinking of old tree stumps which may be under all this lush herbage. I get the impression there

was once a native village here, in which case the forest would be burnt off to make room for cultivation. That's the usual practice. When the soil becomes impoverished the tribe pulls up its sticks and moves off to a fresh site. I can't see an area of ground this size happening naturally unless there's rock close underneath. If I'm right, the open space may have given Lin Seng the idea of making a golf-course. Not that it matters.'

'It'd cost you something for balls if you tried to play a round of golf now,' remarked Algy, apparently treating the matter lightly.

They walked on, slowly, looking about them, examining the ground and its many obstructions, moving, for no particular reason, in the direction of the pavilion. There was no sign of life except an occasional bird that passed overhead, and perhaps for that reason their early vigilance was relaxed. Only the Malay remained on the alert, constantly looking around with his rifle at the ready.

'Do you still think there are bad men here?' Biggles asked him casually.

'Yes, *tuan*,' was the surprising reply.

'Why do you think that?'

'No animals. Animals came here to eat. Not now.'

'He may have got something there,' conceded Algy.

'If anyone wanted to have a crack at us he's had plenty of opportunities,' Biggles pointed out. He went on: 'I think this place has possibilities. Most of this stuff' – he indicated the vegetation with a wave of his arm – 'is fairly soft. A gang of men should be able to clear a track wide enough for a landing. One straight strip would be enough provided there was no wind.'

'It'd take time.'

'How long would depend on the number of men available for the job. At all events, it's the only answer if we're to go through with this airlift project. There's nowhere else. The only alternative, if Lin Seng wants to get away from here, is the road.' Biggles went on with a note of irritation in his voice. 'The whole thing strikes me as daft. That a man should get himself penned up here, afraid to leave for fear of being bumped off, doesn't make sense. After all, this is now a reasonably civilized country.'

'Except for several thousand square miles of jungle and forest,' reminded Algy. 'I wouldn't call this spot, where we're standing now, exactly civilized. It depends on what you call civilization.'

Biggles did not argue about it. He walked on to the pavilion.

'What's the idea?' asked Algy. 'Are you expecting to find anything here?'

'No - except perhaps a few spiders and the odd centipede.' Reaching the door Biggles stopped. 'I don't know,' he continued with a change of voice. 'Someone has been here recently. Everything overgrown except the door. You can see where the vines have been cut.' He reached for the handle.

With a swift stride the Malay intervened. 'No,' he hissed.

'Why not?'

'Bad man near.'

'How do you know?'

'I smell tobacco.'

'So can I,' confirmed Algy, sniffing. 'Someone has been around here smoking a cigar.'

'So what?' murmured Biggles. He drew his gun,

turned the handle and with a sudden movement threw the door wide open.

He stopped, rigid. He stared.

‘Come right in,’ drawled a voice with a smooth, transatlantic accent. ‘I saw you coming this way. You won’t need the gun, so you can put it away.’

## A SURPRISE ENCOUNTER

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THE interior of the pavilion, a large single room, was in the state of dust, decay and cobwebs, that results from long disuse. The only furniture was a table pushed against a wall and a pair of those long woven-cane chairs common in the East.

In one of these, facing the door, reclined, with an easy nonchalance, a man. A white man; small, slim, dressed in a smart dark suit of Western cut. A florid tie hung over a striped shirt. A slip of trimmed black moustache decorated his upper lip. A sun helmet was tilted on the back of his head. A thin column of blue smoke drifted up from a small cigar held in his fingers. Leaning against the wall within reach was a rifle.

He did not move, but his expression became a faint smile either of confidence or amusement at the surprise on the faces of the newcomers; a surprise that none of them made any effort to conceal.

Biggles regarded the man with a frown of disfavour. 'Who are you?' he inquired curtly.

'Say, that's the very question I was waiting to ask you,' was the reply. Still the man did not move.

'I hope you realize this is private property,' returned Biggles shortly.

The answer was a deprecatory wave of the hand that held the cigar. 'Aw, come off it, pal. There's no need to take that line with me.'

'Who are you?'

'What does it matter?'

'It matters a lot. What are you doing here?'

'The same as you, I reckon.'

'That,' said Biggles coldly, 'is most unlikely. You'd better get back to where you came from. You're liable to be shot. The guards here have orders to shoot trespassers on sight.'

'Well now, ain't that too bad,' was the mocking reply. 'I've got a gun, too.'

'So I see. Don't try to use it. I asked you a question. What are you doing here?'

'You a Britisher? You talk like one.'

'I am.'

'Okay. Tell that nigger you've got with you to go some place else so we can talk things over by ourselves, nice and quiet – huh?'

'I've only one thing to say to you – get out.'

'And if I don't.'

'I won't be answerable for what may happen to you.'

The man in the chair drew on his cigar, exhaled a cloud of smoke and said: 'Oh, come now. That's no way for one white man to talk to another in this stinking jungle.'

'That's how I'm talking.'

The man in the chair affected an expression of sorrow.

'Have it your way, brother. Why not sit down and talk sense?'

'What do you want here?'

The man grinned. 'That sure is a good 'un. I'll give you one guess.'

'I see. Well, forget it. You haven't a hope. All you'll get here is bullets.'

'So you want it all yourself. I call that real greedy.'

'I want nothing,' retorted Biggles crisply.

'I get it. You came all this way just to make a friendly call. How come they let you into the house? I know all about that. We saw you arrive.'

Biggles regarded the speaker stonily. 'Now you listen to me, and listen hard, because I'm an impatient man and I get tired of repeating myself. I've nothing to say to you, but I'll give you a spot of advice. Get up and get out while the going's good.'

'Say that again.'

'You heard me.'

The man reached for the rifle.

'You can leave that here,' rapped out Biggles.

'Like hell I will.'

'You're liable to get hell if you don't. Now, on your feet, before I have second thoughts and call the guards. Some of them are Chinese and they have a way of dealing with people they don't like.'

The man did not move.

Biggles half turned to the Malay, who had stood by with an expressionless face during the conversation. 'Call the guards,' he ordered briefly.

The Malay hurried off.

Scowling, the man in the chair got up. 'Okay, brother, if that's how you want it. You'll be sorry.' He reached for the rifle.

Biggles' gun came up again, covering him. 'I said leave it.' He spoke with iron in his voice.

'There are wild animals in the forest.'

'So I see.'

For a moment the man hesitated. He dropped his cigar and ground it viciously under his heel. He walked to the door. Reaching it, he spoke over his shoulder. 'You wouldn't be interested in a million dollars?'

Biggles' reply was short and crisp. 'No.'

'Never say I didn't give you a chance.' The man walked on.

Biggles followed slowly. 'We'll see which way he goes,' he told Algy.

From the pavilion they watched the man until he disappeared from sight behind a clump of bamboos.

Said Biggles thoughtfully: 'It seems to me that if a man can get here as easily as that, Lin Seng's security arrangements are not as sound as he believes. Let's see if we can find the place where he gets on to the golf-course. I was under the impression that the crocodile ditch came round here, but apparently it doesn't.'

They walked on in the direction taken by the intruder. They slowed down when from somewhere in the jungle ahead came the sound of voices. They seemed to be fading, as if the speakers were retiring. They died away.

'I knew he wasn't alone,' said Biggles softly. 'He told us so.'

'How?'

'When he said we saw you arrive. In any case I can't imagine a man of that type walking about the jungle by himself.'

'Are you going after them to find out how many there are?'



'No. There isn't much point in it. Anyway, there's no hurry. We shall know before long. To follow them into cover would be asking to be shot. That man was a killer if ever I saw one. All the same, I'd like to see how he got in here. He seemed to be able to come and go as he liked. Today wasn't his first visit to the pavilion. There were half a dozen cigar stubs on the floor.'

'What did you make of him, apart from the obvious fact that he's a nasty piece of work?'

'He's one of the crooks after the pearls. For what other reason would a man of that type be here? He as good as said so. You notice he spoke like an American. So, we are told, does the man we saw at the teahouse, Sosbell. They may be partners, or in the same gang.'

'The same thought struck me.'

Further conversation on the subject was halted by a noise of voices coming from the direction of the pavilion. They walked back to it to find their Malay had returned with some Chinese guards.

'Where man go?' asked the Malay.

Biggles pointed.

'You no shoot him?'

'No. I made him leave the rifle. How did he get in here?'

'Not know.'

'Doesn't the crocodile river come round this side of the golf-course?'

'Yes.'

'Then it isn't much use. We'd better look at it. Send these other men away. We shan't need them.'

The Malay spoke to his companions. They walked back towards the house.

'What's your name?' Biggles asked him.

‘Ayart.’

‘All right, Ayart, you’d better come with us.’ Biggles led the way to the place where the intruder had disappeared. Reaching the spot where they had previously halted, they advanced with more caution, making use of any cover that offered and stopping sometimes to listen; but all that could be heard was the raucous calls of birds and the chattering of monkeys.

Moving slowly they came to the crocodile gully, when the answer to their question was there before them. The ditch – the jungle watercourse was not much more than that – crossed their path perhaps twenty feet below, the water turgid with mud. Across it had fallen a tree to form a natural bridge. Under it, through a tangle of rank vegetation, a few small crocodiles, presumably young ones, lay on a shelving beach of mud.

‘They don’t look very dangerous,’ Algy said.

‘Their mums and dads are probably not far away,’ answered Biggles. After a careful reconnaissance of the opposite bank he crossed the bridge. He did not stay long on the other side.

When he came back he said: ‘They didn’t have to cut the tree down. It was windblown, torn up by the roots. There may be others. A faint track runs on into the forest. It could be a game path. No doubt the bridge is used regularly by animals. It must be some time since this part of the moat was inspected. All I can say about it is, if this is one of Lin Seng’s defences, if he imagines the ditch is a safeguard against people getting on his property, he’s fooling himself.’

‘What can be done about it?’

‘Nothing that I can see. If this tree was removed it would be a simple matter for anyone to drop another –

even if there aren't others already down. We'll speak to Lin Seng about it.'

'What it boils down to is this,' said Algy bluntly. 'There's really nothing to stop anyone getting to the house, or at any rate, the open ground round it.'

'That, I'm afraid, is about the size of it. Let's go back and carry on with what we were doing when we stopped at the pavilion.'

With Ayart still in attendance they spent the next hour examining the derelict golf-course. They went to the far end without seeing anything more dangerous than monkeys and a family of wild pigs that scampered away on their approach. They were stopped eventually by forest with jungle undergrowth that looked impenetrable. Biggles walked the fringe of it.

'Are you looking for something?' said Algy.

'Yes. I would have thought there might have been a path or a track leading on towards the east. From the map, as I remember it, it isn't more than a dozen miles or so to the sea – the South China Sea. The coast here has a sandy beach and there might be a strip large enough to put an aircraft down in any weather. But there doesn't seem to be a way into what looks like virgin jungle, so we might as well forget it. What do you think of our chances on the golf-course – after some clearing up, of course?'

'Not too bad,' answered Algy thoughtfully, looking over the ground. 'There's no big stuff, like mature trees. It's mostly rushes and brushwood. How long it would take to clear a runway, if Lin Seng was prepared to do it, would depend on how many men he's able to spare for the job, as you said.'

'Before we talk of landing there's the little matter of

getting back to the plane, and I have a feeling after what happened this morning that might not be as easy as it sounds.'

'We shall have to try it sooner or later, and as far as I'm concerned the sooner the better. There's nothing more we can do, so there's no need for us to stay here. I mean, the work of clearing a landing track could go on while we were away.'

Biggles lit a cigarette, shaking his head. 'That doesn't sound very clever to me. I'd like to know the job had been properly done before trying to put my wheels down. You know what native labour is like. With the best intentions in the world, unless there's supervision they would only do what *they* think is enough; but that doesn't mean it's all right by our standards. They'd only have to leave an old tree stump in the middle of the runway to upset our apple-cart good and proper. There's another angle I don't like. If these crooks in the forest see what's going on they might tumble to it and put a spoke in our wheel. If they started shooting at the men working on the job they'd pack it in, and we couldn't blame them for that. It wouldn't be possible to clear the ground with someone shooting at the workmen from the cover of the forest; and I for one wouldn't like to make a sortie to try to drive them out.'

'We've got one of their rifles.'

'It won't be the only one they have, you can bet your boots on that. I want to see a safe landing ground here before I fetch the plane. Let's get back and talk to Lin Seng about it. He may have ideas.'

They started walking back in the direction of the house.

As it happened they did not have to go all the way

to see their host. At the far end of the golf-course, where the path ran through the trees to the open ground, they found him waiting for them, seated in the shade of an old tree stump. He rose to greet them. 'What happened?' he asked. 'I hear you ran into some sort of trouble.'

'Not exactly trouble,' answered Biggles. 'We had a little argument with a man we found making himself at home in the pavilion.'

'What sort of man?'

'A white man, if I can put it like that. He didn't give any particulars of himself, but he spoke English with an American accent.'

'What was he doing there?'

'Waiting to speak to me – so he said. Apparently he knew we were living in the house and being a crook himself could only imagine we were after your pearls. I think he thought we might co-operate with him.'

'What did you do with him?'

'The only thing I *could* do as he offered no violence. I put him off your property. He knows now how he stands with us, so he's not likely to repeat the tactics he tried this morning.'

'What sort of tactics?'

'Bribery.'

'Then he can't know who you are.'

'No. I imagine he's puzzled.'

'How did he get to the golf-course?'

'He crossed the ditch on a fallen tree. We've seen it. I think something should be done about it, and a check made for any similar crossings. How long is it since that was done?'

'I don't think it ever has been done. You may think

that careless of me, but my policy has been, while I am left alone, to leave these people in the forest to their own devices, hoping they will become sick of leading such an uncomfortable life. They might even be forced to withdraw with malaria, or one of the several diseases a white man can contract in the jungle.'

'That's a bit optimistic.'

'What is the alternative? As your government learned a few years ago, to try to find a party of men hiding in the forest is like a blind man searching for a pin in a bundle of hay.'

'I realize that,' returned Biggles. 'All the same it's wrong that these people should be able to come and go as they please. I'd put a stop to that. Am I to understand you don't know how many there are of them?'

'I have no idea,' confessed Lin Seng. 'I have reason to suspect there are at least two separate parties waiting and watching from the forest.'

'Waiting and watching for what?'

'For me to leave, with the pearls. They may be hoping to tire me out, exhaust my patience.'

'You think they would attack and rob you *en route*?'

'I'm sure of it. What else could be their object in maintaining this siege? As things are I don't feel justified in shooting at them even if the opportunity offered. I might kill a perfectly innocent man.' After a pause Lin Seng went on. 'Do not suppose I am happy in this state of affairs, but what can I do? Until the telephone was cut I was kept in touch with an even more serious threat by my office in Kuala Lumpur. Now I don't know what is happening.'

'What could be a more serious threat?'

'Indonesian troops landing on the coast. They are doing that, as you must know, and these men have been trained in jungle warfare. Here we are not far from the sea, and a landing party of raiders armed with modern weapons could make things very uncomfortable, to say the least – particularly if they knew what I have in the house. That might even be their objective.'

'I meant to ask you about that,' Biggles said. 'Is there a path from here to the coast?'

'I don't think so; but that wouldn't deter a party of Indonesian commandos determined to get here. As I have said, they are specially chosen men, at home in the forest. There have been several landings.'

'But none near here?'

'Not as far as I know. Without a telephone I have no means of finding out. I am completely out of touch.'

'I can see that,' acknowledged Biggles. 'But you have some good men working for you, like Ayart, the Malay lad who came out with us this morning. Couldn't one of them do some scouting to find out where these crooks have their camp, and how many there are of them? I prefer, when possible, to take the initiative, instead of leaving it with the enemy.'

'I wouldn't care to ask a man to undertake such a dangerous mission. However, I will speak to them and get their views on the subject. What is more to the point at the moment, what did you make of the golf-course as a landing ground?'

'It is of course useless as it is. We think it has possibilities, but there would be a lot of work to do to make it serviceable; but a gang of good men under my supervision should not take long to ascertain if the project is feasible. Something will have to be done, anyway.'

There's no point in our going off to fetch the plane unless there is somewhere to land when we come back.'

'It appears to me,' said Lin Seng earnestly, 'that your first problem is to get back to where you left your plane. You will have to use the road?'

'There's no other way, is there? The journey will have to be tackled some time. I wouldn't attempt to make my way through the forest to the main road.'

'I doubt if you could do it.' Lin Seng looked at his watch. 'It's time for lunch,' he said, rising. 'We'll talk more about this later.'



## DISTURBING NEWS

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THROUGHOUT lunch, and after it, the situation was discussed from every angle. It would take too long to narrate the pros and cons; anyhow, it is not necessary. Let it suffice that the final decisions were these.

Lin Seng, carrying his pearls, would stand by to embark on an aircraft if one could be brought to Taihan. He would be flown to Kuala Lumpur and from there go on to London by the first regular service. If necessary he would charter a special plane.

The big question, of course, was how to get the Auster to Taihan. Two problems were involved. Firstly, Biggles and Algy would have to travel the dangerous road to Kuala Lumpur; at any rate, dangerous as far as the main road. Secondly, a landing ground would have to be ready for the machine when it arrived at Taihan. In this matter there was no choice. The open ground around the house was too small for anything except a helicopter; and as one was not available there was no point in talking about it. This left only the old golf-course, and before this could be used a landing track would have to be cleared.

Lin Seng said he would put men on the job at once, working under the supervision of Biggles and Algy. As

soon as they were satisfied with the result they would proceed to Kuala Lumpur by road to fetch the plane. It was realized this might be more easily said than done, but there was no alternative.

Biggles said he would feel happier about it if he knew the strength of the opposition they were likely to encounter; that is, the number of men in the forest, and if they were working as a single party or several. Upon this Lin Seng went off and after a little while returned to say that Ayart, the Malay, would do some scouting in the forest hoping to get this information.

‘I’ll go with him,’ said Biggles.

Lin Seng looked doubtful. ‘Is that necessary?’

‘Perhaps not necessary but advisable,’ returned Biggles. ‘It’s always a good thing to have two men on a dangerous mission. Apart from a possible mishap to one they give each other moral support. Anyway, I don’t like asking a man to do what I wouldn’t do myself. We can make a sortie while Algy is marking out the landing track. He’s as well able to do that as I am.’

‘What if you’re attacked?’

‘If that happens we should be justified in taking any steps to defend ourselves.’

‘Very well. That’s up to you. I’m in your hands,’ Lin Seng said.

‘By the way,’ went on Biggles. ‘Have you tried the telephone lately? There’s just a chance – not a very bright one I must admit – that the line has been repaired.’

‘I tried it this morning, but the line was still dead.’

‘You might keep trying it.’

‘If it’s repaired it will only be cut again.’

‘I expect that; but if these crooks in the forest don’t

know about the line being put in order, it may be a little while before they discover it; and in the interval you might have time to have a word with Mr Tong. He should by now have heard about the murder of the Post Office engineer. If another has been sent out Mr Tong should know about it and may try to get through to you. He knew we were coming here, but he can't check that we've arrived. For all he knows we may have been ambushed on the way.'

'Mr Tong is very efficient,' stated Lin Seng. 'I have every confidence in him. He'll get a message through to me if it's humanly possible.'

'How?'

'He may send a man by bus as far as the junction with the private road, then to make his way here on foot, or perhaps on a bicycle. He may call on the police for help. Many things are possible, but until we receive a message we shan't know what is being done.'

Biggles agreed, stubbing out his cigarette. 'In the meantime we might as well be getting on with something.'

'Today?'

'Why not? There are still four hours of daylight left. We could start marking out the track.'

'How many men will you need?'

'Two will be enough for the moment. One can cut bamboos for us to serve as markers. The other, perhaps Ayart, can stand guard to see that no one crosses over and sneaks up on us.'

'Very well. I will attend to it.'

With that the conference broke up. Lin Seng departed. Biggles and Algy went to the front entrance to wait for the men who were to assist them. Presently

they came; Ayart with his rifle and another Malay, a much older man, carrying a kris, which can be used either as a weapon or for cutting a path through the jungle. He also had a light crowbar apparently for making holes for the posts that were to serve as markers for the proposed runway.

As they walked to the golf-course Biggles said quietly to Algy: 'We should soon know if we shall be allowed to go through with this.'

'Do you think there's any doubt about it?'

'Very much so.'

'What's to stop us?'

'These fellows in the forest. If they don't see us they're almost sure to hear us. They may take no notice, but they may come to see what's going on. If they realize what we're doing, as a landing ground here certainly wouldn't suit them they may be troublesome. They'd be able to pick us off one by one, and, as we shall be in the open and they'd be sniping from cover of the forest, it's hard to see what we could do about it. By killing that Post Office engineer they've shown they're not stopping short of murder.'

'I see what you mean,' said Algy thoughtfully. 'If they start shooting we can't expect Lin Seng's lads to offer themselves as targets. Why should they risk their lives for what, after all, isn't their affair? They've nothing to gain. I don't know what keeps them here.'

'Loyalty to their boss, I suppose. Pity the stuff on the golf-course is so green and lush or we might burn it off. To try it would be a waste of time. It'll have to be cut.'

The Malays had dropped behind a little; the one with the *kris*, evidently having been told what he was to do,

was already cutting bamboos and trimming them to six-foot lengths.

'I'll tell you what,' Biggles said when they arrived at the golf-course. 'You know the line we thought would be the best. A couple of stakes at each end should be enough to show the area to be cleared. Our wing span is thirty-six feet, so a track fifty feet wide should be okay, anyhow in the first place. If we're not interfered with it could be widened later to be on the safe side. You do that. It doesn't need both of us. I'll walk over to that fallen tree and watch if anyone tries to cross to see what we're doing. Hello! What the devil —'

Biggles' expletive was understandable and needed no explanation. It was caused by the sudden drone of an aircraft flying low. Staring in the direction of the sound they saw the machine, a light monoplane, burst over the tree-tops, diving on a line that would take it over the house.

'Great Scott!' breathed Algy. 'Don't say they're going to start bombing the place.'

'What good would that do them?'

For a few seconds the plane, in its dive, was so low that it was out of sight behind the narrow belt of trees that towered between the golf-course and the house. When it reappeared it was heading away in a climbing turn. Levelling out it continued on its course, now in the direction from which it had come. The little party on the golf-course stood staring until the drone faded.

'What was all that about?' muttered Algy, looking perplexed. 'I expected an explosion. If it dropped a bomb it must have been a dud.'

'I wouldn't try to guess what it was doing,' answered Biggles.

‘Did you recognize the type?’

‘I wouldn’t swear to it, but I fancy it was one of the new series the Mitsubishi people are putting on the market.’

‘What on earth would a Japanese aircraft be doing here?’

‘Ask me something easier. Still, there’s no reason why there shouldn’t be one in Malaya. They can be bought on the open market. But never mind about that. Its objective was the house. There’s no doubt about that. And it didn’t take it long to do what it came to do.’

‘Could it have come to get some photos of the lay-out of the place?’

‘If that’s the answer it must be working for the enemy. We don’t need any more photographs.’ Biggles lit a cigarette. ‘I don’t like it. It was up to no good. What did it do while it was out of our sight? That’s what I’d like to know. I’m wondering if we shouldn’t go back to the house to find out.’

‘It had no intention of landing, or trying to land,’ declared Algy. ‘As far as I could see the pilot didn’t even look for a possible place to get down.’

‘Which suggests to me that he knew before he started that he wouldn’t be able to land here. It follows that he had no reason to land. He did what he came to do, whatever that might have been, and beat it for home.’

‘Well, what are we going to do? Carry on or go back to the house? We’re wasting time.’

‘We’ll go back to the house,’ decided Biggles. ‘We’re not in all that desperate hurry. Lin Seng may have an idea of what the plane was doing.’

They started to retrace their steps, but had not gone far when they saw their return was not necessary. Lin

Seng himself appeared from the gap in the trees, walking quickly. When he saw them he waved a piece of paper.

'So that's it,' murmured Biggles. 'The plane dropped a message. We should have thought of it. My brain seems to be getting addled. Maybe it's the climate.'

Lin Seng hurried up.

'So they've dropped a message,' Biggles said.

'Yes. It's important, and I thought you ought to know at once.'

'What is it – an ultimatum?'

'No – no. Nothing like that. This isn't from the enemy.'

'From whom, then?'

'Mr Tong.'

'*Mr Tong!*' Biggles looked at Algy helplessly. 'What's the matter with me today? I guess wrong every time.'

'It was the only way Tong could get information to me,' went on Lin Seng. 'I told you he was a resourceful fellow.'

'Then what he had to tell you must have been urgent.'

'It was. Very. You'll agree when I tell you. There's a report of an Indonesian landing on the coast quite close to here. Early yesterday morning about fifty guerrillas beached their boats and disappeared into the jungle. It is supposed that as usual they will have explosives to do as much damage as possible.'

'Is there any reason to think they are coming in this direction?'

'If they follow their usual practice, which is to disrupt communications by blowing up bridges and so on, they will probably make for the main road, which would mean coming near here. If they have maps they

may make for Taihan and my private road. I'm afraid this isn't going to make things any easier for us.'

'If it comes to that, it isn't going to make things easier for these crooks already hiding in the forest,' said Biggles. 'If they come into collision with these raiders they're likely to be in real trouble. Did Mr Tong have anything else to say?'

'Not much. I think he was in a great hurry. As soon as he heard of the landing he went straight to the airport and hired a plane to drop a message here. He mentioned only one other matter. When the Post Office heard of the murder of their engineer they sent out two more men to repair the line. They had not returned when Tong wrote his message.'

'Two men,' growled Biggles. 'That's a fat lot of good. Two men can be murdered as easily as one. They should have had an armed escort. Not that that would have been much use, either. The line will only be cut again somewhere else. I have a feeling the Post Office hasn't yet grasped the seriousness of the situation. In view of this new raid I imagine they'll have plenty on their plate without worrying about us. But let's not talk about that now. We've work to do.'

'I came to warn you about these Indonesian troops, thinking they might take you by surprise. I think you'd better come back to the house.'

'Why? Even if the raiders are coming this way it will take them some time to get here. It seems to me that we now have reason to press on as fast as we can, in case we are stopped. We still have a couple of hours of daylight. That should be time enough to put in the marker posts. Tomorrow morning you might let us have as many men as you can spare for the clearing. We've got



to fix this landing ground or we're wasting our time here. You go back to the house. You shouldn't have come here.'

'Why not?'

'You're asking to be shot.'

'What about you?'

'We have to take that chance or we're likely to be here for a long time; but there's no reason for you to take risks that are unnecessary.'

'Is there nothing I can do to help?'

'Nothing, thank you.'

'Very well. I'll go back. Take care.'

'We will. Thanks for coming out to give us the news.'

Mr Lin Seng turned and walked towards the house.

'This wretched business is becoming more complicated every day,' grumbled Biggles. 'However, there's nothing we can do about it, so let's carry on with what we came to do.' He pointed to the east end of the golf-course. 'If these Indonesian troops are heading for the main road that's where they are most likely to appear. They can't have got here yet, but we'd better keep an eye in that direction, just in case.' His voice rose a tone as he added sharply: 'What's that?'

'Elephant,' said the old Malay.

'Yes, I can see that,' returned Biggles. 'I've seen elephants before. That looks like a cow elephant and her calf. I should have said, what are they doing here? Are they wild elephants?'

'Yes, they are wild.'

'How did they get here?'

'Through forest.'

The two elephants, now clear of the forest, had turned, and were now facing the spot from which they

had emerged, trunks held high, questing the air for scent. A smaller animal now appeared. A tapir. It did not stop, but ran on to disappear in some bamboos.

'Something must have disturbed those beasts,' said Biggles quietly, as the two elephants came on a little way, turned again and stood regarding the forest suspiciously.

'I think they come by old path,' said the Malay.

'What old path? I understood there was no path.'

'Long time ago when I am boy I live *kampong* not far over there.' The Malay pointed. 'There is very old path to sea. I walk many times. Path comes to *kampong* here. No big house then.'

Said Biggles, seriously, to Algy. 'It's a good thing we know about this path. If the raiders know of it, or find it, they could get here faster than we supposed.'

'Could it be that Taihan is their objective?' asked Algy anxiously.

'I wouldn't know. It could be. If that's so it's all the more reason why we should press on. Those elephants wouldn't have run from anything except men.'

Although he had spoken quietly, the two animals must have heard his voice, for they wheeled round, and after staring fixedly in their direction dashed back into the forest.

After a brief hesitation Biggles continued: 'You get the markers in position. I'll stand by the fallen tree to see that no one worries you from that direction. Watch the forest where those elephants came out.' He strode off, making a slight detour to look in the pavilion. There was no one there.

## A SHOT IN THE DARK

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BIGGLES approached the fallen tree, the natural bridge across the crocodile dyke, with the caution the situation demanded. Neither seeing nor hearing anything suspicious, he found a good 'hide' under a tree-fern and settled down to watch. Time passed. Not a sound came from the primeval rain forest, but once in a while a splash in the brackish water deep down in the brook below him told its own story.

He could not see Algy or the Malays, but he could sometimes hear them as instructions were given for the placing of the bamboo poles. The crisp *snick* of the kris spoke of the poles being sharpened for easy insertion into the ground.

In this way rather more than an hour passed, and with the shadows lengthening he had just decided there was not much point in waiting any longer – in any case he thought Algy must have finished, or nearly finished, his task by now – when the snapping of a twig somewhere in the forest brought him to the alert. Presently the sound was repeated, closer.

A minute or two later a man appeared. A white man. It was the man he had seen in the pavilion, a thin cigar again held between his teeth. At his heels, carrying a

rifle, was a coloured man. He might have been a Malay, or he might equally have been one of the many mixed breeds to be found on the Malay Peninsula.

The white man approached the tree confidently and had taken the first step on it, with the obvious intention of crossing over, when Biggles spoke.

‘That’s far enough,’ he said shortly. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’

The man stopped. His eyes roved swiftly, seeking the speaker.

Biggles stood up, revealing himself. ‘You’re not coming over here,’ he said curtly. ‘I warned you to keep off this property. It’s private. So turn round and go back to where you came from.’

‘Who the hell do you think you are to give me orders?’ was the harsh reply. ‘I go where I like.’

‘Not here. Incidentally, what I gave you was advice.’

‘I don’t need any from you. And get this, smart guy. I carry an American passport, and in case you don’t know it that’ll take me anywhere.’

‘That’s what you think. You’ve got another think coming. What do you want over this side of the ditch, anyway?’

‘We could hear something going on, so I came to see what it was.’

‘If that’s all you want to know I can tell you. We’re getting ready for more unwelcome visitors than you, should they decide to call on us. We have reason to think they’re coming this way. Go home.’

‘Are you kidding?’

‘No. Maybe I’m stupid, but I’ll tell you something. That’s really why I came here. I thought you might be

along. By the way, does that man with you understand English?’

‘Sure. Else he wouldn’t be no use to me.’

‘Good. He ought to hear this. He can pass the news on to his pals. A large party of Indonesian raiders have just landed on the coast to the east of here, not far away. We have reason to think they may come this way. If they do they won’t bother to ask to see your passports.’

For a moment the man looked startled. Then his eyes narrowed. Then he sneered: ‘Bah! D’you expect me to believe that?’

‘Please yourself. I’ve told you. You’re no friend of mine, but I’d give anyone a chance to save himself being sliced up by a bunch of toughs.’

Doubt appeared in the man’s eyes. ‘How come you know about this? No one ain’t been here and your phone ain’t working.’

‘You’re forgetting something. Think again.’

‘Think what?’

‘You must have heard that plane come over a little while ago even if you didn’t see it.’

‘We heard it. But it didn’t land, so you can’t get away with that.’

‘It didn’t have to land. The pilot could do what he came to do without that.’

‘And what did he do?’ The speaker looked frankly curious.

‘He came from Kuala Lumpur. He dropped a message to warn us that a party of about fifty Indonesians had landed on the coast. When last seen they were entering the jungle as if they intended coming in this direction. I don’t know how many friends you have with you, but it can’t be many, so if you bump into them you’ll wish

you'd taken my advice and cleared out while the going was good. I don't know why I'm bothering to tell you this. Considering what you're doing here, some people would call me a fool. Now go and think it over. That's all I have to say, except that you're not coming this side of the ditch, so don't try anything. Save your bullets. You may need 'em.'

'What are you aimin' to do about these raiders?'

'Making preparations in case they try to interfere with us. You wanted to know what was going on here – well, now you know.' This may not have been strictly true, but Biggles was in no frame of mind to quibble.

'Why not muck in with us to deal with 'em?'

'We can manage without any help from you.'

The man on the other side of the tree did not move. He didn't speak. He chewed on his cigar as if weighing what he had just heard. After a minute he appeared to reach a decision, for he spat out his cigar and said: 'Okay, buddy. Have it your way. I don't know what your game is, but you're playing it wrong.' With that he turned and walked away, followed by his gun-bearer.

Biggles watched the two men disappear in the riot of vegetation in the direction from which they had come. He lit a cigarette and waited for a few minutes; then, as the noise of their passage died away, satisfied that they had really gone, he made his way to where he judged the rest of his party would be. The sun had by now dipped behind the trees and the brief tropical twilight was fast closing in.

'I was just coming to look for you,' announced Algy, when he joined him. 'Did I hear you talking to someone?'

'Yes. The fellow we found in the pavilion. He heard

something going on here and was on his way to see what we were doing. I stopped him.'

'What did he say to that?'

'Not much. I gave him something to think about. He went off, as I imagine, to pass on the news to the rest of the gang.'

'What news?'

'I told him about the raiders landing on the coast.'

Algy frowned. 'You told him! What was the object of that? I'd have let him find out for himself.'

'I wasn't prompted by the milk of human kindness, you may be sure,' answered Biggles with a wry smile. 'The information, whether they believe it or not, should give them something to think about instead of concentrating their attentions on us. He had a gun-bearer with him, a Malay I think, and I was talking to him as much as the other. If the word goes round, as it probably will, any Malays those crooks have with them may see the red light and desert in a bunch.'

'True enough,' agreed Algy.

Biggles surveyed the work that had been done, the placing of the marker poles. 'That should be all right,' he confirmed. 'Tomorrow morning with as many men as Lin Seng can spare, we'll get cracking on the clearing. Now let's get back to the house before it gets really dark.'

He had turned to go when a rifle shot cut into the sultry silence like the crack of a whip. The reverberations were followed again by a silence equally sinister.

Biggles spun round, staring into the gloom.

'That had nothing to do with us,' remarked Algy. 'It was some way off. I doubt if we could be seen from the forest in this light.'

'From which direction did the shot come, do you think?'

'It's hard to say. If you asked me to guess I'd say from over there.' Algy pointed towards the fallen tree.

'I'd have said it was more that way.' Biggles pointed to the east, the distant end of the golf-course. He consulted the Malays, but they were equally in doubt and chose different directions.

'So we don't know,' said Biggles.

'Is it important?'

'It could be.'

'Someone fired a shot,' Algy said. 'We know there are armed men in the forest, so I can see nothing surprising in it.'

'It's a question of who fired the shot and at whom, and why at this hour, when it must be too dark for a man to see his foresight. I can't imagine anyone hunting in this light. A man would only shoot in an emergency.'

'You think unless he ran into a tiger, or one of those elephants, the shot would be fired at another man?'

'That's how it seems to me. I may be wrong. It's these raiders I'm thinking about. Are they closer than we supposed? Well, it's no use standing here guessing; but I'll tell you this: tomorrow we shall be well advised to keep our eyes skinned. From what I read before we came here these Indonesians who are being put ashore are trained commandos, specializing in jungle warfare. We'd look silly if they crept up on us.'

Biggles walked on towards the house.

When they reached it the two Malays left them, going round the back to their own quarters.

Biggles and Algy, entering through the front door,



found Mr Lin Seng waiting for them in the hall. He had a revolver in his hand. 'Did I hear a shot?' he asked.

'You did,' Biggles confirmed. 'It was fired somewhere in the forest, impossible to say just where; but we're pretty sure it had nothing to do with us. Anyway, the bullet didn't come near us.'

'Who would be shooting at such a time? It's practically dark.'

'That,' replied Biggles, 'is what I'd like to know. There was no answering shot, which suggests that the man shot at – if it was a man – was hit. I can only hope these alleged raiders haven't arrived. If they have they won't make life any easier. While we were out I learned there used to be a native path from the east end of the golf-course to the coast. I suspected someone was about when two elephants came out, obviously having been disturbed. They may have come down the path. I may have a look at it tomorrow. Even if the path's overgrown, as I imagine it will be, it would enable the raiders, if they struck it, to move faster than we thought possible.'

'It could be so,' agreed Lin Seng, gravely, laying his revolver on the hall table. 'I suppose there's nothing we can do about it except wait to see what tomorrow brings.'

'There is one thing you might do, if you have enough men, and that's mount double guards tonight,' suggested Biggles.

'Yes, I'll do that,' agreed Lin Seng. 'But now go and have your baths. You must be ready for a meal.'

As they went to their rooms Algy said to Biggles: 'Well, how do you feel about things?'

Biggles answered: 'If you want me to be frank, I'm

not exactly bursting with confidence. Those crooks in the forest are one thing; fifty trained and fully armed troops are a very different matter. If they launched a full-scale attack on Taihan I don't see how we could hope to hold the place, much less get back to Kuala Lumpur.'

Algy looked troubled. 'What can we do about it?'

Biggles shrugged. 'At the moment I haven't a clue. I'll think about it. You might do some thinking, too; and you'd better think hard.'

## BIGGLES MAKES A PLAN

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'I'VE been thinking about the position here, and the more I think about it the less I like it.' Biggles, wearing a silk dressing-gown of Imperial Chinese yellow (lent to him by his host) sat on the foot of Algy's bed and lit a cigarette.

It was nearly midnight. Unable to sleep, he had just walked into Algy's room expecting to find him in bed; instead he had not yet undressed, apart from taking off his jacket. In his shirt-sleeves he was sitting by the window. The room was in darkness except for the tropical moonlight that flooded through the open window. With the window open, to have put on the electric light would of course have produced an invasion of moths, mosquitoes and other insects that are attracted by artificial light.

Outside, beyond the cleared area, the vast Malayan forest rose like a black wall, silent, and in the circumstances sinister. A party of fireflies waltzed in the shadow of the house.

Algy considered Biggles' remark for a minute before he answered. 'What can we do about it? You tell me. I've been thinking about it, too, and I don't like it any more than you do. It's no use trying to get some sleep

when you know you're sitting on a keg of gunpowder and that someone may put a match to the fuse at any moment.'

'That describes the position as I see it,' answered Biggles. 'By sitting here doing nothing we've left the initiative with the enemy, and that's never a satisfactory policy. It's time we did something about it.'

'Yes, but what? We've started making a landing strip. It's hard to see what more we can do until it's finished. We're still not sure how long that's going to take. I've been sitting here sweating on it. One thing sticks out a mile. If we don't soon get that airstrip finished it never will be finished.'

'That's the point I came in to make,' Biggles said. 'Having given the matter a lot of thought, I've decided it isn't necessary for both of us to stay here to do what after all is a fairly simple job.'

Algy looked round. 'Just what do you mean by that?'

'It shouldn't take more than a couple of days to clear the strip. Exactly how long will depend on what lies hidden in the grass and stuff. If we both stay here one of us will be wasting time, and that, as you've remarked, is something we can't afford to waste. Or put it like this. Leaving you to complete the job I could make a dash for Kuala Lumpur and fly back, say, in two days' time to pick you up. You could make a signal that it was okay for me to land. If you weren't ready for me I could push off and return the following day. That should save time. See what I'm getting at?'

'Yes, I see what you mean,' answered Algy slowly. 'As you say, that would save time – if it worked.'

'Why shouldn't it?'

'You talk about making a dash for Kuala Lumpur as if the way was wide open. It isn't, and you know it.'

'I think it's worth trying. If I failed to get through you'd be no worse off than you are now.'

'That's nonsense. I should have you on my mind. How am I to know if you've got through, anyway?'

'If I'm not back here with the Auster in a couple of days you can assume I didn't get through.'

'Then what do I do?'

'That's something you'll have to work out for yourself.'

Algy shook his head. 'I don't like it. You'd never get to the main road.'

'I shan't unless I try.'

'It's too dangerous.'

'It won't be any easier if these Indonesian infiltrators come this way and surround the house. And in case you've forgotten, one of us, or both of us, will have to try to get through eventually, to fetch the plane. Otherwise we'd be stuck here indefinitely. That wasn't the idea. We came here to give Lin Seng an airlift with his pearls, and as far as I'm concerned that's still the project.'

Algy shrugged. 'Okay. Have it your way. You're in charge of the operation. When are you thinking of going?'

'I hadn't thought as far ahead as that. I wanted to speak to you about it first. I shall discuss it first thing in the morning with Lin Seng and get his views. We can't do anything until then, so let's leave it at that.' Biggles got up, stubbed his cigarette, and was on his way out when the quiet of the night was shattered by the shrill jangle of the alarm bell.

For an instant his eyes met Algy's. 'Looks like I've left it too late,' he snapped as he strode to the window.

Swiftly though he had moved, things outside had moved faster. There came the sound of many voices as the guards went into action. The searchlights had come on and were sweeping the open area with broad bands of light. One floodlit the bridge, resting on it. Others picked up and fastened on a single scantily clad figure running towards the house, arms raised, either as a sign of surrender or to show he carried no weapon. As he ran the man shouted. What he was calling neither Biggles nor Algy knew, for he used a language unknown to them. Rifle shots cracked. The man stumbled, fell, but got up again and ran on, still crying out in a loud voice. The lights held him in their beams. Nobody else had crossed the bridge. Vague forms could be seen in the darkness closing in on the runner from the direction of the house. There were no more shots.

'The guards were wide awake, anyhow,' observed Algy, as the intruder was seized.

'We'd better see what this is about,' said Biggles crisply.

He looked down through the open window on to the balcony, apparently considering going that way; but he must have decided the drop was too long and made for the door. 'I can't believe this was an attack,' he went on, as they hurried to the stairs. 'It's hardly likely one man would try anything on his own.'

'He must be one of the enemy.'

'I doubt it.'

'Why?'

'If he's one of the gang in the forest he would have known about the alarm device on the bridge.'

'Who else could he be?'

'I wouldn't know – unless he's a messenger from Mr Tong in Kuala Lumpur trying to get through to us.'

They hurried on down the stairs to the hall where they found Mr Lin Seng, a red dressing-gown over his pyjamas, pistol in hand, accompanied by his two personal Chinese bodyguards. One was unlocking the door.

'What goes on?' asked Biggles.

'I don't know.'

'What was the man shouting?'

'He was calling for me, saying he was a friend. I have ordered him to be brought here.'

'I think he was wounded,' Biggles said. 'You don't want blood on your carpet, so I suggest we go out on the terrace.'

They advanced to the door, now open, and arrived on the terrace at the same time as the guards, uncereemoniously dragging their prisoner. He was still gabbling incoherently. The alarm bell had been cut off, but the lights were still on, covering the open ground. Neither Biggles nor Algy knew what the man was saying, but apparently Lin Seng understood, for he gave an order which resulted in him being dropped on the stone floor, blood forming a little pool from a wound in his leg. He still spoke rapidly, holding a hand towards Lin Seng as if in supplication.

Another order and the leg was roughly bandaged. While this was being done, Lin Seng, imperturbable as ever, spoke briefly to Biggles in English. 'I know this man,' he said. 'I will tell you more when I have questioned him. He says he brings a message. It may be true. I shall find out.'

The man was brought into the hall and made more or less comfortable on the floor. The outside guards returned to their posts and the door was shut.

Then followed a long conversation between Lin Seng and the wounded man. As presumably it was in Chinese, all Biggles and Algy could do was to remain silent and wait for it to end. Which eventually it did, the wounded man being carried away. Lin Seng beckoned and led the way to the lounge.

'I can now tell you what this is about,' he said, pouring out iced fruit juice drinks and serving his guests. 'The name of that man is Chin Tusang. He is Chinese, and like many of us he loves pearls. He used to work for me as a pearl buyer in Singapore. He left my service to better his position, as he thought, by joining a Japanese pearling syndicate operating in Indonesian waters, work for which I must admit he was well qualified. He soon regretted this and wrote to me asking if I would take him back. I declined. Once a man leaves my service voluntarily I never take him back because he may be a spy working for competitors in the pearl market. I now suspect he wanted to return to me because he knew what was likely to happen to him.'

'What was that?'

'Knowing Malaya intimately, having been born here, he was conscripted into the Indonesian armed forces and trained as a commando soldier.'

'With a view to being infiltrated into Malaya, I suppose?'

'Exactly. That is what he has just told me.'

'You believe him?'

'Yes. At least, I have no reason to disbelieve him.'



Knowing his way about this country, it was the sort of thing that could easily happen. What he has done to-night is, I think, sufficient proof of his integrity.'

'What has he done?'

Lin Seng still spoke calmly. 'He came here to warn me that my house is the first objective of the raiding force landed recently on the coast. He was with the party, no doubt because he knows the district. It was not until the landing had been made that he, with the rest of the rank and file, learned what they were to do. Having obtained my pearls, the house was to be used as a base from which to cut communications on the main road. So he came here to warn me.'

'Which means, I take it, that he deserted from his unit, regiment, or whatever they call these raiders.'

'Yes. He slipped away at the first opportunity.'

'Why should he risk his life by doing that?' Biggles was still sceptical.

'I can give you one good reason, although you may find it hard to believe. He happens to be a lover of pearls. He has reason to know some of the pearls I have here because he was the agent instrumental in their purchase. He remembers I was a good employer when he worked for me. Whatever the West may think, we Chinese are not without a sense of gratitude.'

'I imagine what he's really after is his old job back,' opined Biggles cynically.

'Probably,' admitted Lin Seng. 'Let us say he saw a chance to do me a service with that hope in mind. But never mind what prompted him to do it, the fact remains that he has come, and risked his life in doing so.'

'Where did he leave the rest of his gang?'

'He says they are still together, having made camp in the forest about six miles away, to the east. They will probably move on tomorrow.'

Biggles glanced at Algy. 'I may still have time to get away.' Then, to Lin Seng: 'How did this man find his way here?'

'He knew of the private road leading to Taihan. He worked his way round through the forest until he came to it and then tried to cross by the bridge. When the alarm went off he made a run for the house.'

'I'd have thought he would have run back.'

'I put that question to him. His answer confirmed what we know, although he could not have known. In the forest he nearly blundered into a camp of white men with Malay servants. They came after him and were close behind when he reached the bridge. That was why he wouldn't go back.'

'And you are satisfied with that explanation?'

'Yes. The story tallies with what we know.'

'Very well. If you're satisfied so am I. But I still think this could be a trick to enable the man to get inside the house.'

'I shall keep the man under strict guard for a time, of course.'

'I think that would be wise. Frankly, I wouldn't trust a deserter.'

Lin Seng changed his tone of voice. It took on a note of curiosity. 'What did you mean just now when you said you might still have time to get away?'

Biggles explained the decision he had reached after talking it over with Algy; that he should make a dash for the main road in the hope of getting to Kuala Lumpur to fetch the plane.

Lin Seng looked surprised, and alarmed. 'Do you really mean this?' he questioned.

'Of course. And in view of what we have just learned, there's all the more reason why I should go.'

'When?'

'Now.'

'Tonight – at this moment?'

'Yes. If I wait for these raiders to surround the house I shall never get away. Apart from anything else it's up to us to let the government forces know where these Indonesians are and what they intend to do. We can't expect any help from them unless they know. And I can't see you holding the house very long against men equipped for demolition.'

'We could hold out for a time.'

'Perhaps, but that wouldn't alter the position. There's another reason why this might be a good moment for me to try to get through. These crooks already in the forest, seeing the man they were after reach the house, will probably retire to their own camp for the night, not expecting anything to happen.'

'Yes,' agreed Lin Seng, thoughtfully. 'I see that. Which is not to say I like the plan. It's dangerous; far too dangerous. What if you fail?'

'You'll be no worse off than you are now. Lacey will carry on. Your only chance of getting away with the pearls is by air, and every hour's delay will make that more difficult. Can you think of an alternative to what I propose?'

'Frankly no. Would you like someone to go with you?'

'I hadn't considered it. I wouldn't ask anyone to go

on what I must admit is a risky job. Were you thinking of someone in particular?’

‘Ayart. The young Malay who went out with you this morning. I assume you will go in your car. If you lost it and found yourself in the jungle he would be useful. He could find his way where you could not.’

‘Very well. As long as he understands the danger and is willing to volunteer, I’d be glad to have him with me.’

‘I will speak to him.’ Lin Seng walked away.

‘Just a moment,’ said Biggles. ‘The guards had better be warned of what I’m doing, or I may be shot before I get to the bridge. And I shan’t need the lights.’

Lin Seng signified assent and went on.

Biggles turned to Algy. ‘That settles that. All you have to do is press on with the landing strip. Try not to make it too obvious what you’re doing or someone may try to stop you. That may happen anyway. You keep a look-out for the plane. Assuming I get through tonight, I could come back any time in daylight. I shan’t be able to land until you get the ground cleared. I doubt if you’ll finish the job tomorrow, but you might. That will depend on how it goes. I shall reckon on being able to land the following day. However, if I do get through to Kuala Lumpur tonight, I might run over tomorrow to see what progress you’re making. If I see a smoke fire I shall assume it’s okay for me to land. If no smoke I shall move off and come back later. See that Lin Seng is ready to make a dash for the plane as soon as my wheels are on the ground. Any questions?’

‘No. I think it’s all clear.’

'Fine. You might bring the car round while I'm getting my clothes on. Check the petrol. I shall be ready in five minutes.'

'Fair enough.' Algy went off.

A few minutes later, now with only the moon to show a light, the car crept quietly up to the front entrance. Biggles, Lin Seng and Ayart, carrying a rifle, were waiting on the steps. They came down as Algy got out, leaving the engine running.

There was no ceremony at departure. Biggles took the driving seat, Ayart beside him. A wave from Biggles and the car, showing no lights, moved off towards the bridge. Algy and Lin Seng, on the steps, watched it go; saw it accelerate as it neared the bridge, and then, crossing it, disappear from sight.

Algy drew a deep breath of relief. He did not move, but stood staring into the soft moonlight listening, while he could still hear the engine. The sound faded. As there was now no point in remaining he had half turned away when from the direction of the road came a spasmodic burst of gunshots, rifle or revolver. He stiffened. He looked at Lin Seng. Their eyes met. There was nothing to say.

They waited, eyes on the bridge, hoping perhaps to see the car coming back. Or Biggles alone. Or Ayart. Five minutes passed. Nothing happened. No one appeared. There was no sound. The forest stood black and stark, like a fresco carved into the sky.

Side by side Algy and Lin Seng walked up the steps and into the house. Lin Seng's guard locked and bolted the door. They went on to the stairs. At the top Lin Seng paused to say, simply:

'I will see you in the morning.'

'You will have to be early,' said Algy, quietly.

'Does that mean you intend going on with the airstrip?' inquired Lin Seng.

'Definitely,' answered Algy.

With that last word they returned to their rooms.

## AN ANXIOUS DAY FOR ALGY

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THE following morning, sunrise saw Algy at work on the job in hand. He had at his disposal twelve men, mostly Malays, which were as many as could be spared without weakening the defences of the house. Every man had a weapon of some sort in addition to the tool to be used for the clearance of the rough herbage. Two men were detailed to keep watch, one in the direction of the fallen tree and the other on the far end of the dis-used golf-course, where it seemed the raiders were most likely to appear.

The workmen, advancing in line abreast across the strip chosen for the landing ground, made good progress, moving faster than might have been expected, this being made possible by the soft nature of the vegetable growth. The occasional young tree was quickly cut off with an axe at ground level. From time to time the stuff cut was dragged to the side of the strip both to dispose of it and show clearly the nature of the ground exposed. On this Algy kept close watch to make sure no obstructions had been overlooked, an old stump, perhaps, or a large stone.

The men worked with zest, laughing and chattering

as natives will, as if the whole thing was a joke, in spite of Algy's frequent requests to keep quiet. They may not have realized fully the importance of what they were doing; or, for that matter, the purpose of it.

While well satisfied with the progress being made, for there was now every reason to hope the strip, without interference, would be finished on time, Algy was far from happy. Unable to forget the shots that had marked Biggles' arrival on the road, he had an uncomfortable feeling that all this work was likely to be labour in vain. The airstrip was never likely to be used, at all events by Biggles who, if he was still alive, was probably held up somewhere in the forest. Moreover, he – that is, Algy – did not expect to be left long in peace. It would obviously be impossible to carry on with the work should the labour force come under fire from raiders under cover in the near-by forest; and if the report they had received from the deserter was true, this could happen at any time. It would not take long for the Indonesian guerrillas, trained in jungle warfare, to cover the six miles from their last camp. Probably not more than six hours. Therefore the best that Algy could hope for was that enough ground would be cleared to allow an emergency landing to be made. To this end he concentrated the work up the middle of the track. It could be widened afterwards if they were not molested.

The work went on. The only thing that happened was the appearance of a wild sow with her litter at heel. She burst out of the forest near the far marker poles, and seeing the men promptly bolted back again. The significance of this was not lost on Algy. Someone had disturbed the swine and it was not hard to guess who that was.



Shortly before noon, with about a third of the distance cleared, and Algy grateful for every precious minute, Lin Seng arrived on the scene, a Chinese guard following behind.

'How are you getting on?' he inquired, without showing any anxiety in the matter.

'Quite well, as you can see,' answered Algy. 'You shouldn't have come here,' he added.

'Why not?'

'It isn't safe. You know that. Someone may be watching us. If you were recognized he might be tempted to shoot you. That would be the end of Taihan.'

'Have you seen anyone?'

'Not yet; but I have a feeling this lull is too good to last. I'd feel happier if you were in the house. Remember, the lives of these men depend on you. If you get yourself killed what's going to happen to them?'

'I have not overlooked that possibility. I really came out to tell them that from now on they will get double wages. Call it danger money if you like.'

'Money wouldn't be much use to them if the place was taken by storm. What could they do?'

'I wouldn't worry about that. I imagine they would fade away in the forest and make their way, in their own time, to a safe place. Knowing what their fate would be if they were taken prisoner, it is likely they would fight to the death.' Lin Seng looked at Algy with a faint smile. 'Any more depressing questions?'

After a searching survey of the forest Algy answered, 'There is one point about all this to which I have given some thought.'

'Oh, and what is that?'

'The pearls.'

'What about them. They are safe where they are.'

'For how long?'

'What do you mean?'

Algy spoke his mind. 'It's time we faced the facts, Mr Lin Seng. Of the crooks in the forest I have nothing to say. We knew about them when we came here and were prepared to deal with them. But a large party of enemy troops is a very different cup of tea. From what I have read in the newspapers, these men are landed with all the equipment necessary for what they have to do. That means heavy weapons, bombs, explosives. . . . For how long could you hope to hold the house against a full-scale attack?'

Lin Seng was not dismayed. 'We shall deal with that question when the time comes.'

'I'm sure you will. But at the finish the house is bound to fall – that is, if the attack comes before the plane arrives to take you away.'

'You still think the plane will come?'

'We *must* think that, otherwise there's no point in our staying here any longer. It would be better to take to the forest now, while it is still possible.'

'If you wish to go you are free to do so.'

Algy flushed. 'That remark was not in the best taste, sir. Would you, in the present circumstances, expect me to desert the ship?'

'No. I withdraw and apologize. I should not have said that.'

'Let's forget it,' Algy said. 'What I am really thinking about is the pearls.'

'In what way?'

'If the enemy takes the house he will get the pearls. Oh yes, I know they are well secured where they are;

but apparently these Indonesians know they are here and it's a safe bet they will not leave without them, even if it means tearing the house to pieces to get to them. With explosives that wouldn't be very difficult. It wouldn't take them long to locate the vault and concrete wouldn't save them.'

'I see your point, Mr Lacey. Have you a suggestion?'

'I imagine you would do anything to prevent them getting the pearls?'

'I would destroy them first. Fire would reduce them to ashes. I would do that and die with them.'

'Well, there's no need for that – yet. But don't you think it would be advisable to take the pearls from the strong-room and bury them where there is not the remotest chance of them being found? Only you would know where they were. If the house was captured, and you managed to escape, it might be possible for you to return at a later date, when things are quiet, and recover them.'

Lin Seng considered the proposal. 'There is much to be said for your idea. I will think about it. Are you coming back to the house for lunch?'

'No thanks. I can't spare the time. Anyway, I prefer not to leave here.'

'I will send something out to you.'

'Just a sandwich will do. The only thing that matters is to get this strip cleared.'

'You won't finish it today?'

'I didn't expect to; but by sundown, if there is no interference, we should have broken the back of it.'

'Which way do you expect the enemy to come – if he does?'

'I wouldn't try to guess. They might arrive at the far

end of the golf-course; on the other hand, if they strike the stream and see the crocodiles they would probably follow the far bank looking for a way across. Should they see the fallen tree no doubt they'd use it, which is why I'm keeping close watch in that direction. Should they miss the tree they'd carry on to the bridge, so you'd better keep an eye on it.'

'I'll post two good men to watch it.' Lin Seng went off in the direction of the house.

Algy returned to the workers and urged them on. Presently one of the house servants arrived with a packet of sandwiches. He ate them standing, always watching the perimeter of the golf-course. He was now counting minutes, for on the completion of the task everything now depended. If Biggles came as arranged – although in his heart he knew this was a big if – he would expect to find everything ready.

Algy walked about, testing the cleared ground for soft spots; there were some, but on the whole nothing to worry about. It wouldn't carry a jet, even if there was room, but there was little chance of a light plane getting its wheels bogged down. Anyway, with the ground now exposed to the sun there was reason to hope it would dry out.

It was about four o'clock, with the sun losing some of its enervating heat and the strip now two-thirds of the way towards the end marker post, when there came the first indication of trouble on the way.

It was the unmistakable crack of a rifle shot no great distance away; but from exactly where it came it was not possible to say. Birds rose from the trees over a wide area. There was no sound of a bullet. The men stopped work, looking around apprehensively. One or two

ducked behind the nearest cover, but for the most part they stood firm. Algy, aware that he was standing fully exposed, went down on one knee. There was no sense in taking unnecessary risks. He counted the men. No one had been hit. There was no sign of the man who had fired the shot. He waited for a minute, and as nothing happened he was about to tell the men to resume work when another shot crashed. Closer. It had a heavier, flatter, report, and obviously had not been fired by the same weapon as the previous shot. Again there was no sound of the impact of a bullet.

Algy hesitated. Who was shooting? At whom, or at what? Were they under fire? He did not think so. Unless the gunmen were bad shots; otherwise, with the forest no distance away, and the workmen fully exposed, someone must have been hit. He realized that he – himself, the only white man in the party, conspicuous in shirt, shorts and sun hat, would be the most likely target. He knew the vicious hum of a bullet passing near, and the thud of one striking soft earth, and he was sure nothing had come anywhere near him. Still he waited. The men were looking at him expectantly for orders, either to withdraw or carry on, when the answer to the problem appeared.

From the direction of the fallen tree a man came running, crying out something. A white man. He swerved as he ran, with backward glances, as if afraid of something behind him. As he drew close Algy recognized him. It was the man he and Biggles had found in the pavilion. He arrived breathless, agitated, sweating with exertion or fear – or both.

Algy, resenting the interruption of his work apart

from anything else, regarded him with frank hostility. 'What do *you* want?' he demanded bluntly.

'Let me stay with you,' pleaded the man, wiping his streaming face with a filthy handkerchief.

'Stay with *me*! You've got a crust, you crook. Get to hell out of it.'

'I can't get back to camp.'

'I couldn't care less. We don't want you here,' rasped Algy.

'The forest is swarming with savages.'

'Savages, my foot. Do you mean Indonesians?'

'That may be what they are.'

'What of it. You were warned they were close.'

'One of them shot at me.'

'And you fired back.'

'Yes.'

'Did you hit him?'

'I didn't wait to see. I bolted.'

'You would,' grated Algy, with biting sarcasm. 'If you've killed one of them it won't improve your chances of getting back to your camp.'

'What else could I have done except run?'

'Why run this way? You should have made for your camp to give your precious pals a chance to get out. All you thought of was yourself. Where did you see these Indonesians?'

'They were coming down the far side of the river as if they were looking for a way across.'

'How many of them were there?'

'I couldn't say. They suddenly appeared, creeping through the jungle.'

'What were you doing there?'

'Looking to see what you were up to.'

'And now you have the brass face to come here asking for protection. I suppose you came over by the fallen tree?'

'Yes.'

'Did the Indonesians find it?'

'I don't know.'

'Then you might go back and find out.'

'Find out?'

'You heard what I said. What do you think you're going to do? Sit here on your backside? If you imagine you can crawl here as soon as you look like getting hurt you'd better think again.'

'If I go back they'll kill me.'

'I couldn't care less.'

'That's a nice way for one white man to talk to another.'

'What gave you the idea you were white? Your skin may be, but underneath you're yellow.' Algy remembered something. 'Where were you last night?'

'In camp of course. Why?'

'There was shooting on the road. What do you know about it?'

'I know nothing about any shooting.'

'Don't give me that. A car left here by road. What happened to it?'

'I don't know. I didn't see it.'

Algy paused. He was sure the man was lying, but he couldn't force the truth out of him. 'All right: if that's how you feel you can get out. We don't want you here.'

The man stood still.

Algy looked at him, for the moment at a loss to know what to do. He was thinking of his own position; or

rather, the task on which he was engaged. He could see no sign of the enemy in the forest. There were still two hours of daylight left. Should he carry on and make the most of them, or ought he to retire to the house before any of his men were hurt? He looked at the work that had been done. It was enough for a risky landing, but another forty or fifty yards would make a lot of difference. He decided to carry on, at all events until he was forced to withdraw. Once they were attacked it might be difficult to get to the house. Moreover, the morning might find the golf-course occupied by the Indonesians. That would prevent any more work.

What to do with the man standing in front of him he simply did not know. He did not want him with them, yet he could not seriously send him back into the forest, to what was almost certain death. Later on, he thought, it might be possible to escort him to the proper bridge when he should be able to rejoin his companions. To do that now would be wasting time he could not afford, yet he did not feel inclined to allow the man to enjoy their protection without doing anything for it.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked curtly.

The answer came without any of the earlier bombast. ‘Cortello.’

‘Very well, Cortello. If you want to stay this side of the river I’ll tell you what you can do; and don’t let’s have any argument about it. You go back to as near as you can get to the fallen tree, hide yourself and watch it. Should any Indonesians try to cross over to this side fire a shot to warn us and hurry back. That’s as much in your interest as ours. There should be no danger if you keep under cover.’

‘If I do that may I stay with you?’



'For the time being. We'll talk about it later. I'm making no promises. This isn't my property.'

'Okay.' Cortello, revolver in hand, but without enthusiasm, moved off slowly in the direction of the fallen tree.

Algy gave orders for work to be resumed and then stood watching, wondering if he had done the right thing. The workmen, as if aware of impending danger, redoubled their efforts and the strip was gradually extended. With luck, Algy thought, it should be finished by nightfall. Time went on. No sound had come from the fallen tree, so he assumed, naturally, that Cortello had seen nothing to report.

With twilight fast dimming the scene in the manner of the tropics he called the workers together to march them back to the house before darkness closed in. What should he do about Cortello? That was the question which now arose. Leave him? No, he couldn't very well do that; moreover, he preferred to have him under his eye. To call him in would mean shouting, and not knowing what was going on in the forest he was loath to make a lot of noise. He was in fact a little surprised that with darkness falling the man had not rejoined them. There was little point in remaining near the fallen tree after dark.

He decided the best thing would be to fetch him. So, telling the workmen to go on home he set off for the tree, moving warily as he drew closer to it. In acting in this way he was thinking not so much of danger from Indonesians, because had there been any about Cortello must have seen them, in which case he would have fired his revolver as arranged. He thought there would be more danger from Cortello who, if he came upon

him suddenly in the half night might in panic shoot at him.

He approached the tree ever more slowly, alert, eyes probing the gloom. There was not a sound, the jungle creatures having apparently retired to their sleeping quarters. He stopped, looking about. 'Cortello,' he said quietly. No answer. He raised his voice a little. 'Cortello, are you there?' Still no reply. Puzzled, he went on, slowly, until through the gloom he could just make out the shape of the fallen tree. There was no one there. Not a movement. Not a sound. His eyes explored the surrounding brush and the edge of the forest on the far bank. Seeing nothing, he was forced to the conclusion that Cortello was not there. Had he crossed the bridge to rejoin his companions? Or had he taken the opportunity to hide on this side of the river, perhaps near the house? Not trusting the man, this was an uncomfortable thought.

He was on the point of leaving the place when, taking a final look round, his eyes came to rest on a light-coloured object stretched out on the ground near a clump of bamboos. It did not move. He couldn't remember seeing it before. Cautiously, pistol in hand, nerves taut, expecting the silence to be shattered by a shot, he made his way towards it. Nothing happened.

He reached the object. It was, as he had begun to suspect, a man. Stooping, he peered into the face. It was Cortello. He was dead. What had caused his death was not evident. Actually, Algy wasted no time trying to find out. As soon as he perceived the ugly truth he had backed against the bamboos in which Cortello may have been hiding when he met his death. There for a moment he stood, tense, heart beating fast, pistol half

raised, prepared for – well, a shot, a shout, anything. Who or what had killed Cortello? One thing only was certain: it could not have been a firearm, or the shot would have been heard.

When, after a minute, all remained quiet, he began to back away. He was reluctant to leave Cortello lying there, but there was nothing he could do about it. Not for the moment, anyhow. Later, perhaps.

As he extended the distance between himself and the corpse he breathed more freely and lengthened his stride. A sharp rustle in a bush gave him a fright, but before he could shoot a small animal had bundled out and galloped away. He did not know what it was. He didn't care. He hurried on to the gap through the belt of timber with the house beyond.

Here, in passing through the gap, his nerves took another jolt. A slight sound brought him to an abrupt halt. At the foot of a big tree something was moving. Had it remained still he probably would not have seen it. As he stood rigid, staring, the object rose up revealing itself to be a man. It was too dark to see him clearly, but judging from his figure it looked remarkably like Lin Seng. What was he doing? Was he engaged in some secret Chinese rite? Religious, perhaps. If so he would not want to be seen. In any case Algy did not want to be caught apparently spying on his host, so, his feet making no sound on the soft, mossy carpet, he walked on.

He reached the house without any further mental disturbance. In the lounge he poured himself a drink. He felt he needed it. Lin Seng was not there, so he waited, glad to have an opportunity to relax.

## DANGEROUS WORK BY MOONLIGHT

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A FEW minutes later Lin Seng came in. He said nothing about having been out. Nor did he offer any explanations of his absence. Algy, for his part, did not ask questions.

'Ah! So there you are,' said Lin Seng. 'What's this I hear about a man, a white man, coming over to our side of the river? When the men came in they told me about it. I understand you gave him the task of guarding the fallen tree. When darkness fell, and he did not return, you went to fetch him. Why?'

'I didn't like the idea of leaving him loose on our side of the stream.'

'So what have you done with him?'

'Nothing. When I found him he was dead.'

'Dead! From what cause?'

'I have no idea.'

'Do you mean he had been murdered?'

'Presumably. There appeared to be nothing wrong with him when he came over to speak to me.'

'How was he killed?'

'I don't know. It was practically dark when I found

him and I didn't feel like staying there in case the man who killed him had a go at me. It would have been easy. The dead man was certainly one of the crooks. He told me his name was Cortello. The body should be buried. I had no tools with me, so I couldn't do it even if I had been prepared to take the risk. I think you'd better hear the whole story.'

'Please tell me. This is all very disturbing.'

Algy narrated what had happened on the golf-course from the time of Cortello's arrival to the finding of his body near the fallen tree. 'Which reminds me,' he concluded. 'Do you happen to have any gelignite?'

For once Lin Seng looked astonished. 'Why?'

'That tree is a confounded nuisance. It's an open invitation to cross the river. We should have got rid of it before doing anything else. It would be a big job to cut it up, but a charge of explosive should soon do the trick.'

'I agree. I think there were a few dynamite cartridges left over from those we had to blow up some old tree stumps when we were clearing the ground here. If so they will be in the outside store-room. When would you like them?'

'If it's all the same to you I'd do the job now, tonight, as soon as the moon rises. If two men who understand English would go with me they could bring in the body for burial at the same time. Cortello was no friend of ours, but I don't like the idea of a body being left in the open to be devoured by wild animals.'

Lin Seng agreed. 'I will fetch the dynamite and the equipment that goes with it and find two men to go with you. Help yourself to anything on the table. I shan't be long.' He went out.

It was some time before he returned, carrying a small wooden box. 'Here are half a dozen sticks of dynamite,' he said. 'I don't know much about these things, so I hope it will be enough. Two men are outside with the electrical gear. They understand what is to be done. The moon is just coming up. The guards have been warned you are out.'

'In that case I might as well move off and get the job done,' Algy said. 'I'll bring the body back here. It can be buried in the morning. As it looks like a case of murder the police should be informed, but we can't do anything about that at the moment.' He picked up the box and departed.

Outside he found two sturdy Malays waiting. Without wasting time talking he set off for the golf-course and the fallen tree. A moon nearly full was climbing into the star-strewn sky, so no other light was necessary. He slowed his pace and stopped once or twice to listen as he neared the place where the body of Cortello lay. Or where he had left it: by the bamboos. It was not there. He looked around thinking he must have come to the wrong spot. But there was no mistake. The body had gone. For a few seconds he stood staring at the ground, dumbfounded, for this was a possibility he had not considered. Had Cortello's friends come to find out what had happened to him and finding the body taken it away? Had it been dragged away by a wild beast – a bear, a tiger, panther, even a prowling crocodile? Realizing the futility of guessing, he looked at his two assistants. They must have surmised what had happened, and from their staring eyes and startled expressions they were far from happy.

Fearing they might succumb to superstitious fears

and bolt, for which they could hardly be blamed since in the jungle civilization is rarely more than skin-deep, he made a show of indifference. There was still the tree to be dealt with. Putting down the electrical firing box, with the dynamite in his pockets, uncoiling the wire as he went, he moved on towards the tree. He could see it clearly in the moonlight, but of course it was impossible to see anything in the inky blackness of the forest beyond.

But he could hear something; a faint, curious twittering. He had already noticed it but paid no attention, supposing the sound to be made by insects of some sort. It certainly did not occur to him that these might be human noises until one of his Malays, overtaking him, pointing at the forest whispered 'Indonesians'. Naturally, Algy stopped. His nerves were already on edge. He stared at the tree. There was not a movement except for a few fireflies dancing. He could still hear the twittering. A twig cracked. The sound was only slight, but the story it told could mean only one thing. Someone, or something, was moving in the forest. Was the tree being watched from the far bank?

Algy's every instinct was to go back; but he fought against it, and after a brief hesitation he resolved to go forward and, if possible, finish what he had come to do. He might never get another chance. At all events he would do his utmost to find out what was going on. He felt he owed that to Biggles. Making a sign to the Malay beside him to come no farther he went on, a step at a time, alone, uncoiling the flex as he advanced, his eyes never leaving the end of the tree that was his objective. Rarely had he found himself in a more tense situation.

Action was one thing, but this waiting for it to happen was a greater strain on the nerves.

He could hardly believe it when nothing did happen. The whispering voices – if they were voices – had stopped. Was that because the men who had been making them had spotted him? Dry-lipped, he covered the last few yards to the tree on his hands and knees. A splash and a grunt brought his heart into his mouth, as the saying is, before he realized the sounds were made by a crocodile in the river. Sweating, from the sultry heat as well as tension, he placed the dynamite in position on the near end of the tree. As dynamite explodes against resistance, there was no need to tamp it. With fingers that trembled slightly he adjusted the detonator, then the flex. Nothing more being necessary, still on all fours, he began to back away. If anything was going to happen it would be now, he thought. But nothing did happen; nothing at all. Reaching the Malays standing by the firing box, he paused to mop the perspiration from his face.

Kneeling, he took the plunger in both hands. Before forcing it home he took a last look at the tree. He frowned. Did he see a movement or were his overwrought nerves playing tricks with his imagination? No. He had not been mistaken. With no more noise than a fish swimming in deep water, a figure had detached itself from the black background of the forest. It moved forward to the tree. Another followed it at a short distance.

Who these men were Algy did not know, and to confess the truth he did not particularly care. They could only be enemies. The way they were behaving was sufficient proof of that.



Waiting no longer he forced home the plunger.

The result exceeded anything he could have imagined. There was a blinding sheet of light and an explosion like the bursting of a heavy bomb. Blast flung him on his back tangled with the Malays, who had also been blown over. Temporarily blinded by the flash he could see nothing. Not that he attempted to, for he realized from the noise that followed the explosion that his best place was on the ground, protecting his head as debris showered down with a tremendous noise of crashing as if all the trees in the vicinity were falling. Some may have been blown down, for, as he now realized, he had used a heavier charge than was necessary. Through the noise he thought he heard cries. There was a lot of splashing in the stream, too, as if the crocodiles had gone mad.

It was some time before the noise entirely subsided, which gave his vision a chance to return to normal. As, slowly, he got up to survey the scene, somewhere on the opposite bank a firearm was fired. For what purpose he did not attempt to guess. Presently there was another shot. He could not imagine what was going on, but supposed vaguely that unless the crooks were shooting at each other, the Indonesians had arrived on the scene.

Peering forward through the moonlight, he saw that where the fallen tree had rested on his side of the river there was now a yawning crater. The far bank was a tangle of vegetation, splintered branches and leaning trees. There was no bridge. The fallen tree had disappeared.

That was all he needed to know.

With a signal to the Malays to follow him he set off at a brisk pace for the house.

Mr Lin Seng was waiting for him in the hall. 'Did everything go off all right?' he asked anxiously. 'I heard the explosion. It must have been heard for miles.'

'The dynamite went off a bit too well,' Algy said. 'The tree went up in a cloud of splinters and I nearly went up with them. I was a bit too close, and not being an explosives expert I may have used more than was necessary. At all events, we shouldn't have any more trouble from that direction.'

'What have you done with the body of this man Cortello?'

'We couldn't do anything with it for the simple reason it wasn't there. If it was we couldn't find it. It certainly was nowhere near where we left it. I'll admit I didn't waste too much time looking for it.'

'What could have happened to it?'

Algy shook his head. 'I can only think his friends must have come over looking for him, and when they found the body took it back with them.'

'But that doesn't make sense, as you English say. Surely if they killed him for coming over to us, they would have taken the body away when the murder was committed.'

'One would have thought so,' agreed Algy. 'I can't make head nor tail of it, unless, of course, the Indonesians had a hand in it. Somebody was there. Before I blew up the tree we could hear voices. In fact, I got a glimpse of somebody just before I fired the charge. I heard shots, too, after the explosion. What that was about I wouldn't try to guess.'

Lin Seng was silent for a moment. 'You realize that if the Indonesians are within six miles of us they must have heard the explosion; in which case curiosity will

bring them along quickly to see what is happening here.'

Algy agreed. 'There's nothing we can do about that.'

'What are *you* going to do?'

Algy considered the question, but not for long. 'If Biggles is coming back it could be tomorrow. We must be prepared. That is, stand by to move fast when the plane appears.'

'Do you still think he'll come?'

'I'm not going to pretend to be optimistic about it, but until we know for certain that he won't be coming back, I shall assume he will. That is how we work. When a plan, or an arrangement, is made, neither side departs from it until proof positive is apparent to make a change imperative. What happened to Biggles we don't know. He may have been captured or killed; but until we know that for certain, I shall carry on as if nothing had happened. Biggles, if he is alive, will rely on that. Therefore we must stand by to move fast should the plane appear.'

'I shall be ready,' said Lin Seng. 'Now, as there's nothing more we can do tonight, I think it would be a good thing to get some sleep in order to be on our feet at daybreak.'

Algy agreed.

## WHAT HAPPENED TO BIGGLES

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WHEN Biggles set off on his night trip to Kuala Lumpur, although he had made light of it in his conversation with Algy, it would be wrong to pretend that he was optimistic about his chances of getting through. Of course, he thought the attempt worth while or he would not have undertaken it.

Success or failure would largely depend on what the gangsters in the forest were doing. They might have withdrawn, not expecting anyone to leave the house at that hour of night. If that were so the trip might turn out to be 'a slice of cake', to use the RAF expression for a simple operation. On the other hand, should the road be blocked, and an armed guard on duty, the prospect of getting through would be bleak. The state of the road, being what it was, a mere track, would make it impossible to turn back, anyhow, in the dark.

It was obviously no use trying to guess what hazards might be encountered. These could only be ascertained by putting the matter to test, and for this he was prepared. He felt fairly confident that so far there was nothing to be feared from the Indonesian infiltrators. If

the report they had received was true they could hardly have reached the spot. On the other hand, if Lin Seng's ex-employee was to be believed the gangsters could not be far away, for he had encountered them. It did not occur to Biggles that there might be anyone else in the forest, friend or foe. He had enough to contend with without imagining others.

He was soon to know what awaited him.

The car, travelling as fast as prudence permitted – perhaps twenty miles an hour – crossed the bridge without opposition and went on for about half a mile. Then, finding the moonlight filtering through the interlacing branches overhead confusing, he switched on his headlights. They revealed two men standing in the middle of the road rifles held high in a 'stop' signal. The accelerator under Biggles' foot went flat with the floor and the car leapt forward. The men jumped aside, saving their lives by a split second. Knowing what was to be expected, Biggles crouched forward. Several shots were fired. The car was hit, but apparently not in a vital place, for it did not falter. A bullet snatched at Biggles' sleeve and buried itself in the dashboard. He took a quick look at his companion. Ayart bared his teeth in a grin to show he was unhurt.

If Biggles thought this was the end of the opposition, and as a matter of fact he did, he was soon to be disillusioned. Within a minute the Land-Rover, still travelling at a fair speed, struck an obstruction that caused it to jump high before coming to a dead stop. It was a terrific bump, and both occupants were flung forward with some force. The steering-wheel came in violent contact with Biggles' stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

At the last moment he had seen the obstacle, but by then it was too late to stop. It was the trunk of a sizeable tree lying right across the road. The fact that some of the branches had been trimmed showed that this was no accident. The Land-Rover is built for rough country, but it cannot climb trees. Biggles did not see Ayart leave the car, but he must have done so because by the time he had recovered sufficiently to look he was no longer in his seat. The door on his side hung open.

Still suffering from shock, and a certain amount of pain, Biggles, unable to go on, took the only course open to him. He got out, instantly to be surrounded by a number of men, all armed. 'What's all this about?' he demanded furiously. He was very angry.

'All right. Take it easy,' answered a voice he remembered. He did not know Cortello by name, but he recognized the man with whom he had had a few sharp words in the pavilion on the golf-course.

'So it's you,' muttered Biggles.

'And this time it's my turn to have the say-so,' sneered Cortello.

By this time an almost frenzied search was going on in the car, everything portable being flung out. Another face Biggles had seen before showed up in the moonlight – the lights of the car having of course gone out. He was the white man he and Algy had seen in the Teahouse of the Golden Flowers, on the main road. The man they had been told was named Sosbell. He was ripping up the car cushions with a knife.

'Are you looking for something?' inquired Biggles.

'Where are they?' snapped Sosbell.

'Where are what?'

'Don't give me that. You know what I want. Where are the pearls?'

'You're not serious!'

'I am, as you'll soon find out if you don't open up.'

'You should have your head examined,' came back Biggles. 'Do you seriously imagine I'd be cruising about this den of thieves with a parcel of pearls?'

He was searched. His automatic was taken by Sosbell who put it in his pocket. Biggles did not protest. He had more sense than to take on six armed men, as he now counted them.

'They're not in the car,' said Cortello, in a disgruntled tone of voice.

'I've told you. You're wasting your time,' stated Biggles.

A Negro, whom the gang had called Sam, had an idea. 'There was somebody else in the car. I seen him. Where's he gone?'

'It's no use looking at me,' Biggles said.

'Was your pal in the car with you?' asked Sosbell.

'He was not.'

'Who was it, then?'

'A Malay boy. He came in case I needed help with the car.'

'Where did he go?'

'Your guess is as good as mine.' This was true. Biggles had no idea where he had gone. He wished he knew. He hoped he had managed to get back to the house to report what had happened. 'If you're going to try looking for him in the jungle I wish you joy,' he added.

The car having been ransacked without result, the two white men withdrew a little way presumably to

discuss the situation. They came back. Cortello said: 'Why don't you pack in working for a Chink and come in with us? There's enough pearls to cut three ways.'

'How many times must I tell you? I haven't got any pearls,' returned Biggles, with a touch of asperity.

'You could get 'em.'

'Not a hope.'

'Where were you going when we stopped you?'

'Kuala Lumpur.'

'Did you expect to get past us?'

'I thought you'd have had the sense to get clear.'

'Of what?'

'These Indonesian guerrillas. They're not far away; and if they don't get you it's likely that government troops will when they come along.'

Sosbell cut in. 'What's this about Indonesians?'

'A big party landed on the East Coast.'

'That's a long way from here.'

'They're not sitting still. We've just had word that they're within six miles.'

'Do you expect me to believe that?'

'You can please yourself what you believe.'

'Have you seen 'em?'

'No.'

'Then how could you know?'

'One of them, a former employee of Lin Seng who had been conscripted, deserted, and came to warn us they were heading for Taihan. You must have seen, or heard, the man run the gauntlet of the bridge. There was some shooting. I decided to make a dash for the nearest telephone to let the government troops know where they are. You've done yourselves no good by stopping me.'



There must have been sincerity in Biggles' voice because Sosbell's manner became less aggressive. 'Why are these raiders making for Taihan?'

'For the same reason as you're here. Their orders are to get Lin Seng's pearls. If you're wise you'll get out while the going's good. These raiders aren't likely to clutter themselves up with prisoners. Not that I care what happens to you. I don't know why I'm bothering to tell you this.'

Sosbell's eyes narrowed with suspicion. 'How come you knew about these Indonesians landing on the coast? Nobody's come up the road.'

'Your partner knows. I told him about a plane coming over to drop us a message. It was sent by Lin Seng's manager in Kuala Lumpur. Do you mean to say he didn't tell you?'

Sosbell looked at his associate. 'Did you know about this?'

'I heard something about raiders landing on the East Coast, but as that's some way from here I didn't take much notice.'

'You knew about the plane bringing the message?'

Biggles stepped in. 'Of course he did. I told him.' He thought if he could cause friction between the two men it would be to his advantage. Apparently this was so, for Sosbell, looking at his partner, said harshly, 'What sort of game are you playing? Why didn't you tell me? If you try double-crossing —'

Biggles interposed. 'As it looks as if I shall have to walk I'd better start.'

'Not on your life,' Sosbell said shortly. 'We're not letting you go. You may come in handy.'

'For what?'

'We may need a hostage. Maybe we can do a bit of bargaining with your friends in the house.'

'What are you going to do about my car?'

'It can stay where it is.'

'You realize it will block the road for any government troops who may come along?'

'That's okay with me. We can do without them.'

'You may change your mind about that,' said Biggles soberly.

'Let's get going,' growled Sosbell. To Biggles he added: 'Don't try anything. If you do you're liable to have your legs cut from under you.'

With that the party set off. Where they were going Biggles of course did not know, but he supposed, correctly as it turned out, that their destination was a base camp somewhere in the forest. He was made to walk between two stalwart natives, one in front and one behind.

After a short walk down the road they turned off and followed what originally may have been a game track; but the sides had been cleared somewhat to form a path that had often been used. An occasional glimpse of the stars through the trees told Biggles they were roughly following the course of the crocodile stream, although some distance from it. When they reached the camp, consisting of a single tent and two palm shelters, he judged they were between half a mile and a mile from the golf-course. To reach this spot they had been walking for half an hour. Dawn was just breaking.

The two conspirators went into the tent. The natives squatted round a smouldering camp fire, and Biggles, seeing no reason to remain on his feet, did the same. He lit a cigarette. He couldn't guess how this was likely

to end. His hopes of rescue were now pinned on Ayart, who must have got away. From inside the tent came the mutter of voices, sometimes raised in argument or anger. He didn't care much what the two men did, but he hoped they would have the sense to move farther away before the Indonesians arrived on the scene. He thought they were more to be feared.

He had an idea the four natives of the party felt the same, and the Negro, Sam, who sat a little apart. Looking anything but happy, they spoke in low tones in their own language.

Tired, and in some discomfort from the blow he had received from the steering-wheel when the car had struck the tree, Biggles stretched himself out and presently dropped off to sleep.

It was broad daylight when he was awakened by Sosbell nudging him in the ribs with his foot. He was offering a mug of what turned out to be tea and a thick sandwich of corned beef. 'Sorry we can't give you caviare and champagne,' he said, with pawky humour. 'We'll try not to starve you to death, but you'll have to make do with this.'

He rejoined his companion now sitting on a camp stool outside the tent. Biggles could not hear what they said, but they spoke as if their nerves were on edge and they did not seem to be on the best of terms. This to Biggles was understandable. If his position was insecure so was theirs, and they couldn't make up their minds what to do. Not that there was much they could do, anyway, unless they packed up and went home.

Having no idea of the time Biggles looked at his watch; but in the rush of events he had forgotten to wind it and it had stopped. From some distance off from

time to time there came a faint sound of chopping. He did not need to be told what it was. Algy and his men were at work clearing the strip on the golf-course.

The day wore on. There was obviously a difference of opinion between Sosbell and his partner and the atmosphere became more strained. It must have been some time in the late afternoon when the man Biggles had first met in the pavilion got up and started to walk away.

'Where are you going?' asked Sosbell, in a voice that was anything but friendly.

'I'll go and see what they're doing,' was the curt answer. 'Sitting here doing nothing is getting us nowhere.'

Sosbell, a curious expression on his face, watched his partner disappear into the jungle in the direction whence came the sound of activity. As soon as he was out of sight he beckoned to Sam the Negro. What passed between them Biggles could not hear; but when Sam nodded and set off in the tracks of the man who had just left, he suspected he had been detailed to shadow him. It looked like the old story of rogues falling out.

Some time later Sam returned in a manner that suggested he had urgent news to impart. Even before he reached Sosbell he gave it in a voice loud enough for Biggles to hear. He said: 'The dirty skunk has gone over to the other side.'

Sosbell's expression left Biggles in no doubt as to how he felt about this. 'I thought that might be his game,' he rasped. 'You're quite sure about this?'

'Sure I'm sure. He went across the tree and called out to the guys working on the other side. They were soon talking like old pals together. When I came away he'd

been given the job of guarding the tree so no one else could get across.'

Biggles found this difficult to believe; but as, as far as he could see, Sam had no reason to concoct such a tale, he had to accept there might be some truth in it.

'Okay, if that's how he wants it,' growled Sosbell in an ugly voice.

'I reckon he'll tell 'em all we planned to do,' went on the Negro.

'We'll see about that. Was he alone when you came away?'

'Sure. Squatting in a bush near the tree.'

After a glance at Biggles Sosbell took the Negro to one side and spoke too quietly for Biggles to hear the conversation. From the way Sam nodded it looked as if he was receiving orders. At the end he went off taking one of the natives with him. Sosbell, gun in hand, returned to his seat outside the tent. He gave Biggles a long hard look, but he did not speak. Neither did Biggles. His brain was busy trying to work out what was going to happen next. He made several guesses, but in the event none was right.

It was nearly dark when Sam and the native returned. The Negro looked at Sosbell and nodded. 'He won't do no talking,' he said, although what exactly he meant by this Biggles of course did not know; but apparently Sosbell knew, for he got up, a curious smile curling his lips.

There was another conversation, too low for Biggles to hear. At the end of it Sam went off again, the same native with him. Sosbell resumed his seat. Presently, looking at Biggles, he said: 'I guess you're wondering what's going on?'

'I must confess to some slight curiosity,' admitted Biggles.

'That rat Cortello decided to play it smart and hook up with your pal on the other side of the ditch.'

'Cortello – meaning your partner?'

'Sure.'

'I doubt if he'll get far with him.'

'Far enough.'

'How far is that?'

'He was given the job of guarding the tree across the ditch.'

'Is he still there?'

'No.'

'Where is he?'

'Where you'll be if you try being smart with me.'

'Where's that?'

'In the ditch.'

Biggles frowned. 'I don't get it.'

'Don't I talk plain enough?'

'Are you saying Cortello fell in the ditch?'

Sosbell smiled unpleasantly. 'Well, he didn't exactly fall.'

Then Biggles understood. His eyes opened wide. 'Good heavens! What sort of devil are you?'

'I reckon the crocs'll see he don't do no talking.'

Biggles felt suddenly sick. 'I've met some cold-blooded killers in my time, but you go to the top of the list.'

'He tried to double-cross me, didn't he?' complained Sosbell.

'I wouldn't know, but whatever he did was no excuse for what you admit you've done.'

'It was Sam's idea. He has a sense of humour.'

Biggles could only stare at the speaker, at a loss for words.

'Forget it,' Sosbell said casually. 'I'm going over the other side myself when the moon comes up.'

'To do what?'

'See what's been going on. You can come along, but if you get any ideas remember what happened to Cortello.'

'I shan't be likely to forget it,' retorted Biggles grimly.

Time passed. Sam returned. The moon appeared through the trees. 'Let's go,' said Sosbell. Looking at Biggles he added: 'Be wise and keep your mouth shut.'

The entire party was mustered and moved off, the Negro leading, in what Biggles supposed was the direction of the fallen tree. Biggles, guarded by two natives carrying unsheathed crises brought up the rear. A narrow track, cut through the jungle, showed that this way to the fallen tree had been used before. After a walk of some distance the pace was slowed, indicating that the objective was not far ahead.

Biggles heard the murmur of the stream. The party halted. The Negro went on alone. He was away for only a few minutes. 'Okay,' he said, and the party moved forward again, the Negro still leading and Sosbell close behind him. Another halt, now on the edge of the gully with the water below. The fallen tree lay across it from bank to bank.

To Biggles it was ironic that he should be so near friends and yet so far away. He also regretted that he had not destroyed the tree while he had had the opportunity. However, he had little time to think about this because the party was moving on again obviously with the intention of crossing over. Would there be any

opposition? Biggles did not think so. What Sosbell intended to do on the other side he could not imagine, but apparently he had a plan in mind.

Moving silently, Sosbell, who had taken the lead, had put a first step on the natural bridge when the world blew up in a sheet of flame and an ear-splitting crash of thunder. Or that was what it seemed like. A wave of blast hurled everyone flat. For a few seconds Biggles was stunned by shock, as everyone else must have been. There was no question of wondering what had happened. When the debris caused by the explosion – splintered wood, branches and masses of earth – flung high into the air, came crashing down, prompted purely by the instinct of self-preservation, he put his hands over his head waiting for the downfall to stop. Coughing from the fumes of the explosive, a glance through dispersing smoke showed him that the fallen tree was no longer there. He also discovered he was half lying across Sosbell who was making no attempt to get up. He didn't attempt to find out why. With his senses returning, although he was still dazed, he groped in Sosbell's pocket and recovered his automatic. Still half-blind from the flash he staggered to his feet, his next thought being to get on to the golf-course. He nearly fell into the gully before he remembered that the bridge had gone.

Turning about, determined if possible to get away in the confusion, he made a rush for the path by which they had reached the spot. The jungle being impenetrable it was the only way out. A tall figure, swinging a kris, loomed up to intercept him. It was the Negro. Without any compunction Biggles shot him and he went down as if his legs had been swept from under him.



Biggles blundered on along the path. Fifty yards and he turned to fire a blind shot behind him to discourage pursuit. Again, his brain still spinning but his sight returning, he ran on. Where he was making for he did not know. Actually, at the moment he had no choice. He was content to get away, anywhere, somewhere to think.

## THE BIG DAY DAWNS

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IN a state of acute anxiety, aware that the next day was likely to be critical, Algy did not have a restful night, with the result that he was glad to get up and dress at the first glimmer of daylight. Early though he was, when he went down he found Lin Seng already busy, his servants mustered and being issued with enough food apparently to last for the day. The main portion seemed to consist of cold boiled rice, in slabs as stiff as suet pudding.

Algy inspected the little army that was to guard the airstrip, without enthusiasm. They looked a motley lot. There were six Chinese, their oriental faces inscrutable, five Malays, four Indians (including a bearded Sikh who had probably been born in East Pakistan) and others whose nationality would have been hard to guess. There were three who, from their light skins and half-European faces, were probably Eurasians. There were even two mop-haired natives who could only have come from one of the South Pacific islands. Algy suspected they had originally been two of Lin Seng's pearl-divers.

Actually, this queer mixture was such as one might have expected to find in the service of a man whose business activities covered the entire Far East. Algy

supposed that in the ordinary way, before the trouble at Taihan started, these men had been employed as secretaries, clerks, cooks, gardeners and general household staff. He had seen some of the men before. They had been part of his labour force working on the golf-course. He did not doubt their courage or loyalty. They must, he thought, have been picked men or they would not be at Taihan.

They were now armed with a variety of weapons from rifles of various calibres to sporting guns that may have been taken to Taihan in the first place for hunting game, big and small. He noticed one man carrying an old-fashioned elephant gun which, when it discharged its four-ounce bullet, was likely to give him a sore shoulder. The Malays also carried their national weapon the kris.

Firearms were handled with a careless abandon that would have shocked a trained soldier, although this was perhaps to be expected. Observing this with misgivings, if not apprehension, Algy remembered the remark made by the Duke of Wellington when he was inspecting one of his veteran battalions before the Battle of Waterloo. One of his officers said: 'What do you think these fellows will make of Napoleon?' To which the Duke replied: 'I don't know, but, by God, they frighten me.'

Algy made a mental note to keep behind his troops when they loaded their weapons.

Lin Seng turned to him. 'I think you had better take charge now,' he said. 'What positions do you want them to take up?'

To which Algy answered: 'I think we should leave a few men to guard the house. If they are attacked – I'm thinking of the Indonesians – they must hold out as long

as possible. If resistance becomes hopeless they will have to make for the forest and hide there until help arrives from Kuala Lumpur, as I think it must before very long. It seems a bit hard on them, but I think you said they could be relied on to do that if necessary.'

'I have left six men in the house; old men, pensioners, but well able to take over the defence posts. They will do whatever I ask them,' stated Lin Seng.

'Good. The rest will come with me to the golf-course and take up positions to guard the airstrip. If nothing happens, so well and good; but should the enemy try to come in that way we shall have to do our best to hold them off so that Biggles can get down. Of course, everything depends on the plane coming, and when it comes. You have the pearls ready to hand. When the plane lands all you have to do is make a run for it. If it doesn't come, and we are forced to retire, we shall have to take cover in the forest with the rest. I shall put you where the plane is most likely to finish its run.'

'What about you?'

'That will depend on what is happening at the time. I may have to give you covering fire to help you to reach the aircraft. The plane can only carry four, although on rough ground like this three would be safer. Those who are left behind will have to take their luck in the forest. It shouldn't be for long. If we get to Kuala Lumpur and report what's happening here some government troops should soon be along. I'm afraid all this may sound a bit vague, but without knowing what's going to happen in the next few hours, it's all we can do.'

'How long shall we stay on the golf-course?'

'All day if necessary, unless we're driven off. I shall continue to act as if the plane will come. By the way, I see these men have weapons, but how are they off for ammunition?'

'It varies. There is plenty for the rifles I have bought since the trouble started, but not much for the old ones. I was not expecting anything like this. By the time I realized fully what was happening, it was too late to do anything about it.'

'Well, we shall have to do the best we can with what we have,' rejoined Algy. He glanced up at the sky, now streaked with bars of light from the rising sun. 'We'd better be getting into our positions,' he went on. 'Where would you like to be? I notice you're not carrying a rifle.'

'I am not good with a rifle, but I have a pistol; that should be enough for me,' answered Lin Seng. 'I thought a good place for me to stand would be in the gap in the trees between the house and the golf-course. From there I could watch the bridge, and the open ground, as well as the golf-course. As you will be guarding the golf-course I could keep you informed of anything that is happening on this side.'

'I think that's a good idea,' approved Algy. 'What about the pearls? Are they where you can get at them quickly? If a serious attack should coincide with the arrival of the plane we may be pressed for time.'

'I have taken care of that,' replied Lin Seng, casually.

'Don't you think you had better give me a spare key to the strong-room, or, if you have moved them, tell me where they are, in case you become a casualty?' suggested Algy.

'If I am killed no one will ever find the pearls.'

'I was thinking you might be wounded and unable to get to them.'

'I would prefer to leave that until it happens, or the plane comes,' answered Lin Seng.

'Don't you trust me?' inquired Algy, nettled by what this implied.

'It isn't that I don't trust you, Mr Lacey, but I know how some of these Indonesians can behave. They are savages, straight from the jungles of the larger islands, Borneo, for instance. If you were captured they would think nothing of torturing you to make you tell them anything they want to know. If you don't know where the pearls are you couldn't tell them. You may think you are strong, but make no mistake, under torture a man speaks.'

'What about you?'

'I am Chinese. That is a different matter. They would get nothing out of me.'

'Very well, if that's how you want it,' returned Algy. 'The pearls are yours, so it's up to you to do as you wish about them. Do you still think they are worth risking your life for?'

'I have risked my life more than once to collect them and I shall continue to do that.'

'Then there's nothing more to be said,' concluded Algy. 'Now let us get into position. The plane may come at any time now.'

'If it comes I shall be surprised.'

'That's because you don't know Bigglesworth,' was Algy's answer. 'Tell the men to follow me and obey my orders.'

'I will do that.'

The party moved off, Algy leading.

When they came to the gap in the trees Lin Seng dropped out, saying: 'I shall stay here.' Algy and the rest went on. Reaching the end of the gap he halted his little force and went on alone to reconnoitre. He could see no movement. There was no sound except the raucous cries of the larger birds. They did not appear to have been disturbed. His eyes explored the fringe of the forest. They found nothing of interest. Not even an animal. He was undecided as to whether this was a good sign or a bad one. He did not forget that the guerrillas had been trained in jungle warfare, so could be expected to move quietly.

He brought on his men and stationed them at intervals of about twenty yards along the edge of the trees through which they had just passed, facing the golf-course, thus covering the approach to the house from that side. He ordered them not to talk or show themselves in the open. He himself settled down near the gap, where he would not be too far from Lin Seng. He suspected it was now a matter of who came first, Biggles or the invaders.

He looked up. The thin early morning mist had lifted leaving the sky pale eggshell blue. There was not a breath of wind, so Biggles would not be troubled by having to land in one particular direction. This was important. A cross-wind landing would have been an extra hazard, particularly on ground that was anything but smooth. He could only hope that the ready-made airstrip would prove long enough.

By this time he had almost convinced himself that Biggles would come; only occasionally, when he remembered all the circumstances, did a doubt cross his mind. He dismissed it. He had to. To fear the worst

would be to court failure from the outset. At all events, he was satisfied that he had done everything he had been told to do. He could do no more.

The sun climbed higher and the blue of the sky deepened. He waited and he listened, listened for the sound he became increasingly impatient to hear. The drone of an aircraft engine. Time passed. He looked at his watch more and more often. Where was Biggles? Doubts began to assail him. Had all this organization at Taihan been a waste of time and effort?

He cupped his hands behind his ears to amplify any sound. All he heard was the brief, angry trumpeting of an elephant. It came from some distance away, for which he was thankful, because while he was not a specialist in elephant behaviour, he felt sure that the animal must have been disturbed; and the only creature likely to disturb it, except perhaps a tiger, was a human being. He remembered the cow elephant and her calf they had seen earlier. It seemed she was still in the region. She would resent interference more than a bull, which would probably make off quietly if he caught the taint of a man. Who was in the forest?

Algy sweated with impatience and anxiety, and also from the mounting heat. He was also becoming depressed. If Biggles was coming he should have been here by now, he thought.

He was beginning to hope the Indonesians were not coming, either, unless for some reason their advance had been delayed, when things started to happen. The first was the appearance of two dark figures moving furtively along the edge of the forest near where the fallen tree had been. They carried what he took to be rifles. What worried Algy was they were on the inside,



his side, of the crocodile stream. On the other hand, he took comfort from the fact that there were only two, which suggested that the main party of invaders had split up into small units, as, from what he had heard, had been their method on previous occasions. That they were Indonesians he did not doubt. Who else could they be? There was no native village anywhere near.

The report of a heavy-calibre rifle showed that one of his men, lower down the line, had also spotted the intruders. The result of the shot was not apparent because both men instantly went flat, and as far as could be seen did not move again. They might have been crawling. There was sufficient herbage to hide them.

Then, while his eyes were riveted on the spot, he heard the sound for which he had been waiting: the distant purr of a light-powered aircraft. The increasing volume of the sound made it clear that it was approaching. He hoped Lin Seng had heard it and would soon join him, to save going to fetch him. With nerves tingling he ran a little way into the gap to see if he was coming. He was peering between the trees when he was alarmed by shooting coming from the direction of the house.

This threw him into a quandary. Should he go forward to ascertain what was happening, or should he go back to the golf-course to see if any more men had joined the two already there? Obviously he couldn't be in both places at the same time. A shot from the golf-course, or somewhere near it, decided him, and he ran back, trusting that Lin Seng would join him, always supposing that he was able to. Reaching the end of the gap he made a swift survey of the golf-course. He could see no movement. The plane was still coming nearer,

although as yet he could not see it on account of the tall trees that intervened.

Now was the time to make the smoke signal as arranged to show that all was well; but he hesitated. Was all well? He was by no means certain that it was; but he resolved to take a chance, feeling confident that when the plane landed he would be able to pin down the two Indonesians he knew were there. He could only hope no more had joined them.

Quickly gathering a bunch of dry grass and some dead sticks, he put a match to them. A thin column of blue smoke rose into the still air. While he was doing this more shots came from the direction of the house. Where was Lin Seng? Why didn't he come to let him know what was happening? he thought irritably. He must have heard the plane.

It came into view. It was the Auster. Algy gasped his relief. But what was it doing? It was flying level at a height of not less than five hundred feet, which made it instantly apparent that Biggles had no intention of landing. From that height he couldn't land. He had not left himself enough room to get in. Algy took a chance and ran into the open, waving both arms. The Auster went on, leaving him staring at it helplessly. He threw more grass on the fire.

The aircraft flew on to the end of the runway, turned steeply, and still without losing height came back. It circled as if the pilot was having a good look at the ground and then went on to disappear beyond the trees in the direction of the house, from whence still came the sound of intermittent shooting. Then the plane reappeared, a little lower but still too high to get in.

Algy could have torn his hair in his impatience. What

on earth was Biggles doing? Why didn't he land? And where was Lin Seng? What was *he* doing? Algy didn't know what to do. Their plan seemed to be falling to pieces. He was desperately anxious to see what was going on at the house, but he daren't leave the airstrip for fear Biggles landed while he was away and came under the fire of the Indonesians who, for all he knew, were still there. They might have been joined by others, an uneasy possibility that was supported by shots now being fired by his own men. It took him a moment to see what they were shooting at. He made out three men running along the inside of the stream. They were a long way out of pistol shot, and before he could reach one of his own men to borrow a rifle they had disappeared into the belt of trees.

More sporadic shooting somewhere behind him sent him back on his tracks. The whole thing seemed to have got out of hand and he decided that whatever happened he must know what was happening at the house. Was it because of events there that Biggles hadn't landed? Aside from that, he felt obliged to find out what had become of Lin Seng. Something serious must have happened to prevent him from coming to the airstrip with the pearls, as had been arranged. It was impossible for him not to have heard the circling, low-flying plane.

He found the answer in the belt of trees.

Pistol in hand he was running through the gap to get a view of the open ground in front of the house, when out of the corner of an eye he caught sight of a movement on his right. He turned his head sharply and at what he saw he came to a skidding stop. Twenty yards away a man was lying on the ground. From his clothes

he looked like Lin Seng. Standing over him with a kris raised as if to strike was a native.

Algy let out a yell to arrest the blow and at the same time dashed forward. He succeeded. The man hearing the shout, turned, the kris still raised. It did not fall. Algy, now half-way towards him, snapped a running shot. It missed, but the effect was to cause the man to bolt; not before Algy had recognized him as the deserter from the Indonesian raiders. At least, that was what he had said. The way he now fled was proof of his guilt as a liar. In his left hand he carried what looked like an attaché case.

Algy raced after him, but seeing he was getting no closer fired another shot. Again he missed. He tore on, hoping to catch the man before he reached a thicket of bamboo in which he would certainly lose him. Realizing he would fail, he stopped, took careful aim and fired. Yet again he missed, for which he was not to be blamed, for his target, aware that he was under fire, was jinking like a startled woodcock. But at Algy's next shot the man stumbled and pitched forward on his face, the kris and the parcel flying out of his hands.

Panting, Algy ran up. Blood between the man's shoulders showed where the bullet had struck. It must, Algy thought, have killed him on the spot. He didn't stop to confirm this. There was no time. Apart from that Algy was in no mood to risk his own life by dallying beside a rascal who had obtained admission to the house by a trick that played on Lin Seng's good nature. He looked to see exactly what it was the man had dropped. A small morocco leather attaché case. He picked it up. As he did so a suspicion darted into his mind as to what it might contain. The spot where Lin Seng was

lying – he had confirmed that it was him as he had dashed past in pursuit of the native – was significant. It was at the foot of the tree where he had seen him on his knees engaged in what he had supposed was some sort of private ceremony.

In a state of agitation that can be better imagined than described, Algy hurried back to Lin Seng. Throwing the case aside he dropped on his knees beside him. Blood was oozing over his forehead from his hair. Investigating, he found a wet patch on the back of the head as if he had been clubbed from behind. There was a nasty open wound. A quick examination revealed no other injury.

All this time Algy had been subconsciously aware of sporadic shooting. Now came the whine of air over the wings of a gliding aircraft to tell him that it was losing height. His one thought now was to get Lin Seng to the airstrip. He looked around. There was no help in sight. He was afraid to shout for fear of being heard by the enemy. He picked up the case, which meant pocketing his automatic, and tried to carry the unconscious body. This, he quickly found, was not practicable. It is one thing to carry a live body, but a different one to carry a limp one, even with both hands free. He dropped the case with the intention of abandoning it. Then the thought struck him, what would Lin Seng say if he recovered to learn that after all he had lost his precious pearls.

Algy was pretty sure they were in the case. Rather than risk carrying unnecessary luggage he resolved to make certain. As he worked it out – as well as his racing brain could work out anything at that moment – Lin Seng was recovering the pearls from where he had

hidden them to have them handy as soon as the plane arrived, when he had been struck down.

Algy picked up the case and tried to open it. It was locked. With a single shot from his pistol he smashed the lock. The bullet not only ripped out the lock complete, but slashed a tear in the leather. Using both hands he tore open the case in a kind of frenzied effort. The pearls fell out. Or to be more precise, the several cases that had been made to hold them.

He paused, dismayed, perceiving that he had done more harm than good, in that the cases, loose, would be more difficult to carry than when they had been closely packed together. He might get one or two of the cases in his pockets, but not all. There seemed to be only one solution to his problem, to discard the cases. He opened a case, scooped out the gleaming contents and thrust them like a handful of marbles into a pocket of his jacket. He did the same with the next, and the next, until all the cases were empty and his pockets rattled with loose pearls. One he left in its own special little case. The Blue Moon.

This done he braced himself for the next effort.

## ALL BUTTONED UP

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LEAVING the cases where he had tossed them aside after emptying them, Algy picked up the unconscious owner and not without difficulty, for he was no light weight, got him across his shoulders in a fireman's grip. Like this he staggered to the open path. There he had to put down his burden to get his breath. He took the opportunity to take a few strides to a position which, through the trees, gave him a view of the house and the open ground in front. He was shocked, but not surprised after the shooting he had heard, to see men running about all over the place. Some wore uniforms of camouflaged material. Most carried a rifle. The alarm bell, which had been ringing, stopped.

Having seen as much as he needed to see, still breathing heavily from his exertions Algy returned to Lin Seng. The whole thing was now taking on the unreal quality of a nightmare. Striving again to get the unconscious man on his back he realized it would take time to get him to the landing ground. It struck him suddenly that there was no reason why he, alone, should do this. It might be quicker to fetch help. It was available no great distance away. This he decided to do.

Leaving the body as it lay, pistol at the ready in case it

was needed, he ran to the golf-course by no means certain of what he would find there. The first thing he saw was the Auster on the ground just finishing its run. He did not stop, but hurried along the edge of the belt of trees to the man who had been next in line with him while they had waited for the plane. It was the big Sikh.

'Come,' gasped Algy, and turning about, with the Indian at his heels ran back to where he had left Lin Seng. The Sikh appeared to take in the situation at a glance. He said not a word. Ignoring Algy's offer to help he picked up his employer and hoisted him across his shoulders. In this manner they returned to the golf-course.

When they came within sight of the landing ground Algy was amazed to see the plane standing at the near end with Biggles beside it smoking a cigarette. Ayart, the Malay, was there, too. Seeing Algy coming Biggles walked towards him.

'Are you out of your mind?' shouted Algy, in something not far from panic. 'The place is crawling with Indonesians.'

'If they're crawling they'll be looking for somewhere to hide,' returned Biggles calmly.

'What are you talking about?' demanded Algy.

'Haven't you seen the troops?'

'Troops! What troops?'

'Government troops, what else? Four truck loads. That's why I didn't land when I first arrived. I kept an eye on them thinking it better to make sure they got here before coming down. Good gracious, what's all this?' concluded Biggles sharply, as the Indian arrived and put his burden gently on the ground.



'Lin Seng was on his way here with the pearls when he was coshed,' explained Algy. 'I arrived on the scene just in time. It was that damned deserter. I shot him.'

'Good.' Biggles was examining Lin Seng. 'How badly is he hurt?'

'He's had a nasty crack on the skull.'

'Anything else?'

'Not as far as I've been able to make out.'

'Fetch the medical outfit. We'll do an emergency job and get him to hospital at Kuala Lumpur right away.' Looking up at Ayart Biggles went on: 'Run to where you can see what's happening at the house. Keep your eyes open. We don't want any bandits to creep up on us.'

Actually there was little risk of this because the Taihan men, who must have been wondering what was going on, were beginning to emerge from the places where they had been posted and were talking to each other.

Algy fetched the medicine chest from its locker in the aircraft.

Biggles had washed Lin Seng's wound and was putting a dressing on it when the patient showed signs of recovering consciousness. He groaned once or twice then opened his eyes. When they cleared his first words were the usual ones. 'Where am I? What is happening?' Then as full consciousness returned he tried to get up. 'My pearls!' he cried. 'Where are my pearls?'

Biggles looked at Algy. 'Yes. I'd forgotten the pearls. Where are they?'

'Not to worry,' Algy said. 'They're safe.'

'Where?'

'Here.' Algy spread his handkerchief on the ground

and began emptying the contents of his pockets. 'Sorry I couldn't manage the cases,' he told Lin Seng, who had raised himself on an elbow and was staring as if he couldn't believe his eyes. 'My pockets weren't big enough, so I had to leave them in the wood. I imagine they'll still be there.' He took out the small case that held the Blue Moon, opened it, and held it out for Lin Seng to see.

Lin Seng let out a cry of joy. 'I don't understand. Where did you get them? I remember hearing the plane. . . .'

'You went to the wood to fetch the pearls.'

'Yes. How did you know they were there?'

Algy tied the corners of the handkerchief tightly. 'I saw you hiding them although at the time I didn't know what you were doing,' he answered. 'When you went to fetch them that ex-employee of yours, who said he had deserted from the Indonesians, must have guessed what you were doing. He followed you and struck you down from behind. I arrived just in time to prevent him from slicing your head off.'

'Thank you. The scoundrel! Where did he go?'

'He didn't go anywhere. I shot him.'

'That's enough,' cut in Biggles, as there was more shooting not far away. 'Let's get out of this before someone puts a bullet through the tank. We can talk later.'

Ayart came running back. He reported that a general battle was going on between the government troops and the invaders, who had scattered and taken cover in the forest.

'It'll probably take the troops some time to round them up,' said Biggles. 'We'll be on our way.'

Algy looked at Lin Seng, who had relapsed into

semi-consciousness. 'Don't you think we had better take him to the house?'

'No. I can't see any point in it. Besides, he needs a doctor. He may only be suffering from concussion, but for all we know his skull may have been fractured. Everyone else had better make for the house. Go and tell them, Ayart. Hurry. Then come back here. We shall need you.'

While Ayart was away Lin Seng was lifted into the plane and put in a reclining position in one of the rear seats. Algy put his bundle of pearls in a locker. When Ayart returned he was made to sit beside Lin Seng to support him. Biggles and Algy took their places. The machine was moved to a position from which it would have the length of the runway in front of it. In a few minutes it was in the air.

'Now perhaps you'll tell me what happened to you,' requested Algy, as Biggles took up a course for Kuala Lumpur. 'Frankly, having heard shooting we couldn't believe you'd got through.'

'There was a time when I didn't expect to,' answered Biggles. 'The road was blocked. There was nothing I could do about it. I had to stop. Ayart managed to slip away, but I was caught, and for a while it looked as if I'd have to stay caught. They kept me under an armed guard all day. They would probably have bumped me off at the finish if I hadn't had a bit of luck.'

'What was that?'

'It started when the crooks fell out among themselves. The old story. Cortello, the man we saw in the pavilion, went off on his own. Sosbell, his partner – he's the fellow we saw in the teahouse on the main road – must have thought he intended to pull a fast one on him. Perhaps

double-cross him by going over to us. At all events, he sent a Negro after him to murder him; at least, that's what I gathered from what happened afterwards.'

'You aren't far wrong,' said Algy. 'Cortello was murdered on our side of the river. I found his body. When I came back with two men to bury him the body had gone. That got me foxed. Do you know anything about that?'

'Plenty. Sosbell, not wanting it lying about, sent the Negro to dispose of it.'

'How?'

'By throwing it to the crocodiles.'

Algy looked horrified. 'How awful! What a shocker this rat Sosbell must be.'

'I fancy Cortello was no better.'

'What happened to Sosbell?'

'I don't know for sure. He decided to cross over to the golf-course, for what purpose I don't know. Maybe, becoming desperate, he had an idea of trying to get into the house. Anyhow, the whole gang moved off taking me with them. We had just got to the fallen tree and were ready to move over when the world blew up in a cloud of dirt and splinters. Sosbell was up in front and he must have copped the full force of the blast. I didn't wait to see. I grabbed my chance and bolted. I couldn't cross the river because the tree had gone. Now perhaps you can tell me what happened to it?'

'I removed it with a few sticks of dynamite that I got from Lin Seng,' answered Algy. 'I decided it had been there long enough. It made it too easy for people to get across. I was thinking particularly of the Indonesians.'

'Ah! When I had time to think about it I thought it might be something like that.'

'And you managed to get clear,' prompted Algy.

'After blundering about for a bit I got to the private road. I struck it above where I'd been stopped. For a minute or two I couldn't make up my mind whether to go back to the house, or try to get through to the main road where there would be a chance to make contact with Kuala Lumpur. I decided to carry on. Good thing I did, because, as it turned out I didn't have to go far. I was jumped by several men and for the moment I thought I'd had it. They turned out to be Ayart, two Post Office engineers and the two cops we met in the teahouse.'

'What were they doing there?'

'Ayart was responsible. When he got away at the road block he ran all the way to the main road. He went to the police sergeant in the village and told him what was going on. The Post Office chaps were there. They'd been sent to find the break in the private line to Taihan. They were soon on the phone to Kuala Lumpur. That started things buzzing; not so much on our account I imagine as to get cracking on the Indonesians. Government troops were soon on the way. What was more important to me, a car was sent to pick me up and take me to Kuala Lumpur. When I got there I lost no time getting to the plane. All this of course had taken some time, and by the time I was in the air heading for Taihan it was broad daylight. That's about the lot. When I overtook the troops in their trucks they were well up the private road. As a precautionary measure I decided to let them get here before I went down. Remember, I hadn't a clue as to what had happened at Taihan since I left. The Indonesians might have been in the house for all I knew. I had a look at the airstrip. It seemed to be

all right, so I gathered you had managed to finish your job, whatever may have happened afterwards.'

'I made smoke,' Algy said.

'I saw it.'

'Then why didn't you come right in? You had me in a nice flap wondering what the devil you were doing. I wasn't to know troops were arriving.'

'There didn't seem any desperate reason for haste, so I waited for them to cross the bridge. I was simply playing safe. I don't take unnecessary risks. Anyway, things seem to have worked out all right. Lin Seng is out and he's got his pearls. There's the airport ahead. I shan't be sorry to get my feet on the carpet. It's a long time since I had any real food, so the skin of my stomach is getting a bit slack. We'll get our pearl-doting friend into hospital and do something about it.'

Minutes later, having received permission from the control room to land, Biggles glided in.

With the landing, apart from a few details, came the end of the Special Air Police operation in Malaysia. It was an unusual assignment; but then, most of Biggles' missions were unusual – which was, of course, why he was asked to undertake them.

There was no more trouble, so the reader will no doubt be able to imagine the rest.

Lin Seng was rushed to hospital in the station ambulance. At his request, the pearls (still in Algy's dirty handkerchief) were taken at once to Mr Tong, at the Lin Seng offices, for safe custody. As Biggles remarked to Algy, he couldn't get rid of them quickly enough. Later, after a bath and a square meal they returned to the General Hospital for the latest news. There they

learned that Lin Seng was suffering from severe concussion, but was in no serious danger.

As there was nothing more to be done, Biggles made a signal to Air Commodore Raymond which said simply: *'Task finished. Leaving for home.'* In fact, he was held up for three days helping the local administration with their investigations. A full report of what had happened turned out to be a lengthy business.

By the time it was finished he was told that the government troops had the situation at Taihan in hand. They had occupied the house pending instructions. The survivors of the Indonesian invaders had faded away into the jungle, but were still being rounded up.

Curiously enough, there was no sign of the crooks, so what had become of them had to remain a matter for speculation. No bodies were found at the scene of the explosion that had disposed of the fallen tree. A thorough search was made for Sosbell, the leader, now wanted for murder; but he was never found. Biggles suspected why. As he said to Algy, Sosbell and his Negro lieutenant were too close to the tree when the explosion occurred for them to have escaped injury, if not death. Dead or unconscious, it would not be long before the crocodiles found them. This possibility did not give Algy, who was responsible for the explosion, any sleepless nights.

They saw Mr Lin Seng only once more, and that was when they took their leave of him before departure. He expressed his gratitude and invited them – indeed, tried to persuade them – to join his organization as his personal pilots; but this, naturally, they had to decline. Nor could they as police officers accept the reward he pressed on them for their services; but they did accept

an invitation to spend a holiday at Taihan whenever they had time off, or felt inclined.

The unique collection of pearls is now in London. Mr Lin Seng brought them himself. With South-East Asia so unsettled he knew of no safer place for them. Or that is what he told Biggles when, some weeks after the trouble, he paid an unexpected visit to renew his thanks.

When he left there stood on the mantelpiece a small, beautifully carved jade ornament in the shape of a fish. It was, and had always been in his own country, he said, a charm, a talisman, that would bring good luck.

'If we have any more jobs like the last one we shall need it,' remarked Algy, after he had gone.





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*Captain W. E. Johns has, during the past thirty years, written over eighty books about Biggles, the intrepid airman whose adventures take him and his comrades all over the world. Most of these books are still available, published by Brockhampton Press. Here is a list of the titles available in Knight Books:*

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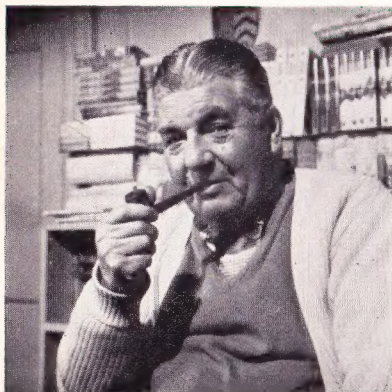
BIGGLES IN THE TERAU

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*'Where am I? What is happening?' Then as full consciousness returned, he tried to get up. 'My pearls!' he cried. 'Where are my pearls?'* The search for Lin Seng's collection of pearls, and particularly his most treasured jewel, the Blue Moon of Asia, takes Biggles and Algy into the heart of the Malaysian jungle.

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